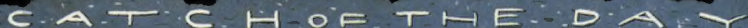


the canadian magazine of the fantastic



PALEOFISHING CHARTERS

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"Paleo Fishing Charters" © Ray Troll

in memoriam...

This issue is dedicated to the groundbreaking SF writer Andre (Alice) Norton—she was an inspiration to us all, and *On Spec* mourns her passing.

errata...

Our apologies to Kate Riedel—that's I - E—for misspelling her name in the editorial of our Winter 04/05 issue... humble butt kisses from us all!

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Addiction Theme Issue
Extras are indicated by the
Hand of God (pictured at
right) from Adam Bowhey's
original cover art—enjoy!



We're On the Move!

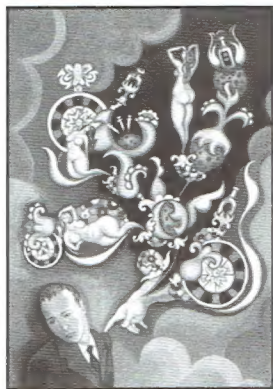
Diane Walton, General Editor

The big news is that *On Spec* recently moved to a new office space. In February, we were given an amazing opportunity to rent some designated-for-non-profit office space in the Stanley A. Milner Library (the downtown main branch of the Edmonton Public Library). This venture is shared with two other groups—the Edmonton Small Press Association, who are independent media and arts-activists, and *Other Voices* Magazine, a literary arts journal that has been published by a volunteer collective in Edmonton for nearly as long as *On Spec* has.

We are already making plans for several dynamic events that will further bring our groups together—open the office space to walk-in traffic via the library, and by extension a whole bunch of potential new readers and supporters. After combining our resources, the office promises to become a vibrant hub of Edmonton's literary/small press community.

If you're in the Edmonton area, please give us a call sometime (that's 413-0215) and we can tell you how you could volunteer your time at the office, or when you can come to visit us—we'd love to meet you! To paraphrase the Friendly Giant, there are two comfy armchairs just waiting for someone to come in and visit...

(con't on following page)



When we announced the "Addiction" theme issue last year, we had no idea how many excellent stories would come our way—far too many for just one issue, and we couldn't let them get away from us. Between these covers, you will find the "Addiction Theme Issue Extras"—those stories we couldn't fit into the last issue—which are also a real treat! Each story is clearly identified by the Hand of God from Adam Bowhey's original cover art (pictured at left).

Exciting news! Over the July long weekend, we'll be attending WesterCon 58—the acclaimed, annual SF & Fantasy convention which brings together writers and fans from throughout Western Canada and the Western U.S., and which has finally made its way to Calgary! Please drop by our table in the Dealer Room so we can chat! See the WesterCon ads in this issue, and also check out the official website at www.CalgaryIn2005.org for more info.

And a final appeal to our loyal readers: *On Spec* is always looking for more opportunities to increase our readership, so if you know of an independent bookseller or magazine stand in your area who has yet to discover us, please send us their contact info so we can approach them about becoming an *On Spec* vendor. We remain one of fandom's Best Kept Secrets, and are confident that our loyal readers will continue your support by encouraging others to read *On Spec*!

That's why you looked after the people around you, kept tabs on them, covered for them when they went down. You never knew when you might need a little backup yourself.

Apex Predator

Kevin Cockle

Having grown up on the prairies, Dr. Paul Stewart never quite got over his awe at the sight of ships the size of buildings, slowly plowing their way down the west coast, or sliding out across the Pacific. The cliff-side view overlooking the ocean was one of his favourite spots in Victoria, capturing the majesty, suggesting the commerce, revealing the power of the sea. He was high enough up to see the deep blue waves stroke onto the surf in grand formation, get a sense of them as having started out as storm waves in the Sea of Japan, or some other exotic origin. Overhead, gulls shone in the sun as they circled and cried. He often wondered if native Victorians ever saw the ocean with quite the same reverence as a transplanted Calgary boy such as himself. He wondered if they even could.

"Doc?" It was Scott Pendergast. As advertised, the man was tall, rangy, with windswept brown hair and pale, jutting features. He was dressed in jeans and a brown turtleneck sweater. Not a bad idea as the sun would be setting soon, and it could get cool along the bluffs. Stewart stood to shake the man's hand, felt wiry cords of strength in those long fingers.

"You want to walk, or...?" Stewart asked.

"Nah—I been on my feet all day. Let's have a seat." They sat down on the bench upon which Paul had been waiting. Both men took a

moment to take in the sweeping vista.

"You court appointed or something?" Pendergast asked.

"Not exactly. I'm a friend of Inspector Taylor's."

"A friend?"

"He thought it best that... he thought you'd be more comfortable talking with someone not on the force."

"I guess he's right about that. You know, I've been through all this before."

"Yep."

"When I saw the news report, with Lindsey... I knew they'd want to get into it again."

"Yep."

"You've heard the crazy shit?"

"I read the report from last year. Crazy is a relative term. You passed a polygraph as I recall."

"That's right. I did. And I'll take another any time they want."

"Let's just talk about it for now. You and me."

"Whatever. You mind?" Pendergast pulled out a small foil bag, produced an oily cheroot. Paul shrugged indifferently, though he was no fan of smoking and it was patently illegal in public parks. Pendergast lit up with a plastic Bic, sheltering the flame from the building sea-breeze.

"Where do you want me to start?" Pendergast asked, tilting his head back and exhaling a not-unpleasant smelling plume of blue-gray smoke.

"Wherever you think it's relevant," Stewart said. "I've got time." Pendergast smiled, nodded, as though the phrase held some sort of particular meaning for him.

"All right. Well, Lindsey—Lindsey Reed, the girl they found on China beach last week—I worked with her at McCaffery a couple years back. We were friends. I used to hear her crying in her cubicle—pretty frequently—and eventually, I just helped out, you know? Just offered to listen. We were friends like that—nothing more."

"You know the report suggested..."

"And you know I passed a polygraph, right?"

"Touché."

"Anyway, McCaffery. You know, we just missed that big baby-boom retirement demographic thing in the investment industry—missed it by a couple of years. Even ten years ago, couple of commerce grads like Lindsey and I would have been full brokers, hauling down six figures, managing 100 million-dollar books. Ten years ago, brokers were

still decision-makers—it was still a commission business, or at least you had the option. Now the computer tells you what asset allocation the client has, and recommends what it should be based on, the account docs on file and the psyche profile/risk assessment questionnaire the client took. Your job is to call and recommend the change, rebalance the portfolio. You know when they took the pilots out of the big airplanes? It's like that now—just pure client service—all the actual investment stuff happens out of Toronto. Business runs itself."

"Being a pilot used to be great job," probed Stewart, sensing a thread.

"Yeah, exactly. Being a pilot in my dad's day was like being a doctor. Maybe you're next, Doc—what do you think?"

"Maybe. Psychologists are probably tougher to mimic than MDs, but you never know."

"Yeah. Well, anyway, being a broker now, you're just hooked into your workstation, and I mean hooked. You got quotas for calls, key strokes, contacts. Clients with over a mill in assets have your home cell, email—they can call any time day or night and you have to service the account through remote access. You get these guys calling from Europe or Japan and you're lucky if you get two hours of sleep a night—that's why you need the pills. It's a brutal grind, let me tell you. And being finance, there's no union. Hell, nobody really considers what investment advisors do as 'labor', and kids coming in today don't give a shit. So it's tough, it's no joke, being on the front lines at a brokerage firm these days."

"I take it Lindsey was having trouble coping?"

"They say the pills don't string you out—that you can stay awake for forty eight hours straight and not have any side effects, but that's bullshit. Lindsey always had trouble when things got busy, always fell behind quota and had to work longer to get caught up. Hell, we all did. That's why you looked after the people around you, kept tabs on them, covered for them when they went down. You never knew when you might need a little back-up yourself."

"You don't work in the industry any more?"

Pendergast grinned, blew smoke out the right side of his mouth. "I disappeared for a year Doc, remember? Without a trace. That job was long gone by the time I got back. I'm on the docks now and you know what? I'm earning just about the same money, and with a hell of a lot less hassle. You don't have the status, you don't hang out at the same bars as the professionals, and there's some physical risk involved—that's the cost. But don't kid yourself—all in all, I'm ahead for having

gotten out."

"And Lindsey?"

Pendergast grew pensive, staring out to sea for a moment before answering. "Yeah, Lindsey tried to get back in. Can you imagine? But then, it's not like she had much choice. Year away cost her seniority, that meant more night shifts and long hauls, less vacation time. Shit." He shook his head, toed red gravel with a dusty work-boot.

"Let's talk about that year."

"Yeah. Well, one night, I invited Linds out to one of the gambling boats. She'd had a hell of a day, bawling, stressed by potential litigation from account docs that listed some woman's birthdate incorrectly."

"That gets you sued?"

"Age is a critical component of the asset allocation and portfolio algorithms. Fuck that up and it fucks everything up. When it's an inherited client, you don't know until the shit hits the fan that something's wrong. I guess this woman had been getting erroneous investment advice for ten years and the broker's on the line then. That's virtually what they're paid for now: to be the buffer. Somebody's got to take the bullet—computer can't do that for you."

"So I took Lindsey to a casino boat. You ever been? Asian-run deals, take you on a slow cruise round the harbour—dinner, dancing, craps, blackjack whatever. It's a nice night. She needed it. I'm not a big gambler, but I just like the ambience of those things. It's like you're in Hong Kong or something, for a little while."

"Anyway, it was late, around midnight and Linds and I were on deck, checking out the moon. I remember it was the big full ball, you know? Shining on the black water. Clear night, stars. We were just passing by that new Haida Island thing—that place with the totems? You could just make out the top half of the biggest one in amongst the pines, sort of all blue and shadowy in the starlight. Linds had had a fair amount to drink—we were talking like drunks. How fucking unhappy and trapped we were. How everything was all screwed up, that people were no better off than cows or pigs these days—just plugged in and processed. Serious but not serious, you know? Like, just releasing pressure, talking about it. Tomorrow would be better—we'd get a little sleep and we'd get some perspective. And then, I don't know. She fell."

"She fell?"

"I don't remember exactly, but somehow, I take my eyes off her for a second and I hear this splash and she's pitched into the fucking drink."

"You don't think she jumped."

"I don't think so. I know it's easy to think that now, but no, I really think she just... fell, somehow."

"And you jumped in after her."

"And I went in after her."

"And?"

"You read all this shit, right?"

"Yeah, I read it. You hit the water, and nobody saw you again for exactly one year, when you supposedly walked out of the surf and marched into Stanley Park one rainy morning. That's the stuff that's been verified. It's your account of the year in between that puts you and me on a bench together tonight."

Pendergast grinned again—just a slight, rueful curling of the lips. He crushed out the cold remains of his cheroot, pulled out another. He spoke as he puffed it to life. "I hit the water and couldn't see shit. Still had my shoes on, all my clothes—I felt heavy, colder than hell—I was thrashing around but I just couldn't see anything. And then things started getting lighter."

"Lighter?"

"Lighter, easier. Pretty soon I was breathing. Pretty soon everything started changing around me. I picked up Lindsey to my right, just sensed her, then heard her tail slicing water—nice strong beats."

"Tail?"

"Yes doctor, tail. I mean, we must have changed as soon as we hit the water, but you don't realize it right away. How do you know you're a person, right? Until I saw Linds, swam up alongside her and smelled her, realized that she'd become a shark, it hadn't really registered that I had too."

"You knew you had become something else?"

"Not exactly. I still felt like me—there's no mirrors down there, you know. But I knew Lindsey was still Lindsey, only now she was a good twelve-foot bullshark, and so there was the idea that we were somehow changed. But the heightened senses, the power, the underwater breathing—it all struck me as natural. It was hard to get outside of that and think about it. We were sharks and we didn't waste a lot of time analyzing the notion. We were sharks, and we just swam away, I guess south."

"How do you know?"

"At the time I didn't—this is me looking back on it. We followed currents, followed food for the most part. We stuck together, which isn't very sharklike, and I remember thinking about some things as

though I were still human. Like how beautiful everything was, or could be. Seeing and feeling so much more than it would have been possible to as a human. There's this electrical sense sharks have that can't be expressed in human terms—experiencing that... it's like..."

"Like seeing the ocean," Stewart said to himself, reflecting his own thoughts back on himself. Like a prairie boy seeing the ocean.

"What?"

"No, sorry. Go on."

"We wound up at this island, someplace off California I think, that's some sort of breeding ground for Elephant seals. We'd hunt seals. That was our life, our purpose: hunting seals. There was necessity, but there was also true, meaningful freedom. And beauty: there was beauty everywhere. I couldn't communicate with Lindsey, but I know she felt the same thing—I could sense it. There was danger, but we still had human sensibility—we knew enough to avoid fishing boats, could tell lures from the real thing. Some things were just given to us by instinct—like where we went and how long we stayed, but the rest of it—we could think about it."

"That's interesting."

"Yeah. It's interesting."

"Scott, tell me: did you ever encounter people as a shark? Surfers, rafters, that sort of thing?"

Pendergast shifted weight uneasily. He hadn't been asked that question before. "What do you mean?"

"I'm asking you, if as a shark, you encountered human beings in your element, and if you did, what did you do about it?"

"I remember... I know after the island, on our way back, Linds took a run at a surfer. Just bumped him. I think she took a bite out of the board."

"Why?"

"That was shark. I see where you're going—could we as people control the shark hunting instincts—but it wasn't always that cut and dried. With the senses, you got input, strong input, and you acted. You could think about it afterwards, but you weren't wired to consider actions beforehand. Linds bumped that guy just to see what was what. But she didn't kill. Neither did I."

"You see my dilemma?"

"Not exactly."

"Scott," Paul paused, leaning forward, gathering his thoughts. "Your story, on the face of it, is this: that one night, you and Lindsey Reed fell into the ocean, and by some unknown means became sharks, roaming the

West coast for one year, before finally re-emerging as human beings."

"Long and the short of it, Doc."

"Do you mind if I explore this notion with you?"

"Guess that's why I'm here. Explore away."

"Why do you think you were turned into a shark? An apex predator?"

"You gotta be kidding. How should I know?"

"You had mentioned earlier that Lindsey and you had been discussing how people had become no better than pigs and cows—food animals in our society. Then you change into predators, and not just any predators, but sharks. Sharks with human sensibilities that make them virtually invulnerable—total masters of their environment."

"So?"

"You've passed psyche and lie-detector tests, you show no current signs of dementia, but there is a worrisome element to your version of events. 'Shark' is a very image-laden reference, has a lot of metaphorical significance built in. Think about it: two alienated, powerless individuals get together to commiserate and what emerges is a kind of power-fantasy in which both become supreme actors who cannot be acted upon. What if, Scott, what if you never actually became a shark, but instead traveled south with Lindsey and acted under the influence of some temporary psychological dislocation? You see what has the police worried, especially in the wake of Ms. Reed's recent death? People who think of themselves as sharks can be a problem Scott. See what I mean?"

The sun was setting, turning the sky into a blazing masterpiece of pinks, mauves and violet blues. Clouds glowed incandescently as light shone up from underneath; waves from Thailand struck the BC shore. Pendergast leaned forward onto his knees, flicked ash from the end of his cheroot and smiled into the wind.

"You see this—this dusk? You'd want to stay out of the water if Linds and I were swimming by. Dawn and dusk, that's when we'd look to get well." Scott paused, took a long drag, exhaled through his nose.

"What do you think, Doc? That I'm so fucked up I can fool poly-graphs? That I went on some kind of killing spree in the States, then came back to brazen it out because I'm so confident that my act can't be penetrated? That about the size of it?"

"That's something Inspector Taylor would like me to help him determine. I'm not so certain at this point that you show any classic homicidal characteristics. I do think however, that perhaps the stress you were under, the medications you took to enhance alertness and minimize the need for sleep may have predisposed you to some sort of

delusion. You grew up on Vancouver Island, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"You mentioned cruising past the Haida exhibit on the night you disappeared. You've been exposed to Haida legends of transformation, animal-man shapeshifting all your life, living on the island. These ideas are probably more a part of your psyche than you realize—I mean, we've all been to the museum, seen the totem poles, learned about them. I think there is strong environmental evidence to support the theory that you may have undergone a fairly radical psychotic break. You and Lindsey may actually have enabled each other to participate directly in the fantasy—that's certainly an established phenomenon."

"Wouldn't we have become killer whales?"

"Excuse me?"

"If we were in some kind of Haida-inspired trance, wouldn't we have become killer whales or ravens or something? I don't recall seeing many shark totems during school field trips."

"Well. It's really the transformation myth I'm getting at, not the specific Haida manifestations of it. Sharks may have more significance to you as an image relating to corporate finance. Your own repertoire, your own iconography may have played a significant part in shaping the fantasy." Scott was shaking his head, staring at the ground. "You don't look too convinced."

"Look, Doc. Don't you think when I came back, that I thought about making up something plausible to account for my whereabouts? Something to tell my family for Christ's sake, let alone the cops. But there was nothing I could say. Nobody had seen me, nobody, anywhere. No credit card bills, no bank withdrawals, no jobs on the road—nothing that would check out. Then there was Lindsey, telling exactly the same story and faced with exactly the same problems. I wracked my fucking brains, but in the end, I just told the truth and let it be everyone else's problem. You prove it wrong, I'm your biggest fan. But you better come up with something a whole lot more substantial than a nervous breakdown."

"Agreed, agreed. But if, just for the sake of argument, you weren't actually sharks, but merely behaving in a disassociative state, what were the seals exactly? Much of your time during the period, real or imagined, was spent hunting. It's disturbing to think about what the seals on that island might be representing."

Scott leaned back, pursed his lips. He paused a good long while before responding, and when he did, his voice was low and even. "If I'm a killer like that, some kind of serial killer—you're pretty cool meeting

me out here by yourself, Doc. You wearing a wire?"

Stewart's turn to smile. "Yes, Scott. That's pretty standard. I am wearing a wire."

"Figures." Pendergast shook his head, stood up, put his hands in his pockets to look out over the cliff. The cheroot dangled from his lips, smoke curled into his eyes, causing him to squint against the breeze. He spoke without turning around. "You even a real doctor?"

"Absolutely Scott. I have a card if you'd like to see it."

"That all it takes? You have a card, so you must be what you say you are? I should have just had some shark cards done up, saved myself a lot of trouble."

"That's a good observation Scott. Identity is... can be problematic."

"Yeah. Problematic. Let me ask you something. We use your version of events, your story, then what happened to Lindsey last week?"

"Suicide seems indicated."

Pendergast turned, chewing on the remains of his cigar. "Yeah, see—that's what you'd have to think, at least until evidence comes up that puts me at that beach, at the right time—so on and so forth. But I don't think it's a good fit. Truth is, Lindsey tried for a year to tough it out after we got back and she couldn't hack it. One night she goes back into the ocean, praying I imagine, for the change to happen again. But Lindsey, she can't swim—that's why I jumped in after her that night, and I think that made all the difference the second time around. That's why I think she fell the first time. I think it all mattered—the fact that it was accidental, the time of night, the moon, where we were—all that shit must have been part of it, like some sort of silent, implied incantation. When she went in deliberately, trying to make it happen, begging for it to happen—it just didn't. So it's not suicide—not in the strictest sense. I don't think she went into the water to kill herself. I think she went in looking for a miracle.

Now, suppose you think I had something to do with it, because in your story, I'm a murderer. I kill Lindsey for reasons unknown, and leave her on a beach for everyone to find, knowing that I'm going to catch all the heat? Not too satisfying, and what I mean by that is: pretty fucking weak. Then there's the other thing." Scott turned around, facing Dr. Stewart once again.

"The other thing?"

"Yeah. Look at me now. I work the docks. I'm in the best shape of my life. You contrast me now with what I looked like after a few years pounding it out in that cubicle on a few hours sleep each week, taking

their fucking pills and grinding out their quotas. I had bowel cancer, Doc. I was just hanging in there until I could take long term disability—that was the only reason I kept gutting it out. And then I spent a year as a shark. You know something about sharks that's right up there with the sense of smell and the electrical gland and all that stuff?"

"What's that?"

"Sharks don't get cancer. And there's no trace of it in my colon now. No trace. Like I'd never had it and never will. You can check my medical records. You hear that Inspector?" Scott raised his voice and articulated very carefully, "You-have-my-permission-to-check-my-medical-records."

Scott Pendergast threw his used cheroot to the ground and crushed it into the red clay, then hands in pockets, he stalked off into the night.

Doctor Paul Stewart reclined onto the bench and faced into the wind. Seagulls flying against the dark backdrop caught the dying light and glowed like sparks from a campfire, bobbing and darting. Jazz music drifted out from somewhere inside the park behind him—something else Paul loved about Victoria. He could just make out the sax, could infer the rest.

"Well?" The voice inside his tiny earpiece said.

"It's a nice touch, Mike, you gotta give him that. Check his files I guess, see what turns up. Who knows, maybe if he'd had some kind of cancer remission before the absent year—that could even have planted the whole 'shark' seed in the first place. Of course, if the remission happened afterward..."

"Jesus, Paul."

"Hey—I'm just a psychologist Mike. Want to see my card?"

The wind picked up, causing Paul to blink. In the shadow of a Haida totem, under a full moon, on the deck of an Asian gambling boat, two stockbrokers had turned into sharks and spent a year swimming it off. Talk about globalization, Paul chuckled. Who knew what the hell had really happened?

A high, sweet riff from a tenor sax rose in the distance, then fell. Maybe the hint of a drumbeat pulsed, it was hard to tell. If I were a shark, Paul thought, I'd be able to hear every damn note. He stood, took a deep breath of that thrilling, vaguely Polynesian air, and headed off towards the music. •

The Ballad of Cindy Charming

Jess Stuart

The problem with fairy godmothers is
there's never one around when you really need them.
Take mine for instance.
Right after the ball she disappeared in a puff of smoke
and I haven't seen so much as a twinkle of pixie-dust ever since.
Hit and run.
Do the maximum amount of damage
in the least amount of time.
Then scoot
before the clock strikes 12
before the magic runs out
before they start looking around for someone to blame.
Mind you
she only did what she thought was best.
What I wanted her to do.
But if I had known what I was asking
where it would all lead
I'd have stitched my lips together
not moved an inch from my cinder heap
and counted myself the luckiest girl in the world.

Charming's in the next room
screwing my step-sister.
She's still ugly as a Viking
but they tell me all cats are black in the dark
and by the sound of things in there
the bumping and the growling
the thumping and the yowling
he's got a tiger between the sheets.

Her visits are always so hard on the furniture.

Funny how things work out.

I remember when Charming brought me home
the people cheering in the streets as our enchanted coach passed by
the enchanted horses prancing smartly
the enchanted coachman cracking his whip above their ears.

"My miracle," Charming called me then
"my own living, breathing miracle!"

I accepted his honorific as I did the crown and everything else—
with a modest smile and downcast eyes.
A prince, a palace and peons to fulfil my every wish.
And to think
I owe it all to footwear.

What the right shoes won't getcha.

Ah, my shoes. My precious glass slippers.

Their magic ruined my wedding night.
Charming took all of three seconds
to strip and dive under the covers
then he watched
(not drooling overly much)
while I removed my jewels
my hair ribbons
the gown
the hoops, the crinolines, the petticoats, the pantalets, the corset,
the bloomers and half a dozen other undergarments I don't think
they have names for.

I tossed everything in a heap
then stepped out of the beautiful glass slippers.

Instantly
all the enchanted clothes on the floor disappeared
and hey presto!
I was back in my cinder-rags and kerchief.

When magic's involved, it can take *forever* to get naked.

I shucked the rags as quickly as I could
but not before my prince suffered a stinging reminder
of his new wife's former station
the baseborn life she had just that morning put behind her.

"Cindy-honey," he called from the bed,
"put the shoes back on."

"But if I do that, the dress, the jewels and everything else goes back on too! They're all connected somehow."

"Yeah-huh."

Well
I was young and in love
so I did what he asked.

Then
after twenty minutes
of trying to fight his way through all those layers
my tiara poking him in the eye
he said

"You know, we could just cuddle tonight."
"Cuddling's good," I agreed.

And even though I knew it would mean I'd never get anything more
than cuddling
ever

I never took the shoes off after that.

My husband was in love with the illusion.
I was a little in love with it myself.

The next day
he invited my step-sisters to the palace
and has been 'entertaining' one or the other of them ever since.

Is it any wonder they call him Charming?

Time passed
as time will do
and for some of us
the magic has worn a bit thin.

All the enchanted horses have run away.
As mice, they were free
had no one's bit between their teeth
no one's lash across their backs.

One night
I guess they'd just had enough
and bolted from the royal stables
galloping as fast and as far away from here as they could.
Godspeed, I say.
What did magic ever get them
but a life of servitude.

We still have the enchanted coach
though it smells now of rotting pumpkin
and there are few smells worse
than rotting pumpkin.

The enchanted coachman
a rat in his previous life
we had to let go.
He had
lapses, let's call them.

We'd catch him
trying to scratch his ear with his foot
or licking his hands and washing his face.
But it was his habit of sniffing his passengers that finally made us
can his ass
That, and we could never keep any cheese in the palace.

Then my shoes began to hurt.
At first just in the middle of the month
when I retained water
but then all the time.
My feet turned an angry red
and swelled up to fill every centimetre of space inside the shoes

bulging over their crystal confines
little balloons of flesh drooping over the edges.
I couldn't get them off now if I took a hammer to them.
And before you ask
I've already tried that.
God-mummy dearest put a protection spell on the slippers.

Wasn't that thoughtful?

It's been ages since I could walk.
Peons carry me wherever I want to go.
But mostly I just sit on the throne
this one or the one down the hall second door on the left.
Somebody comes in once a day to dust me.
Charming will breeze in now and then
kiss me on the forehead and ask
"How's my miracle?"
"Just fine!" I always say. "How's yourself?"
"Never better!"

Then he breezes right back out again
to take care of business
political or pudendal
legal or lascivious
while I meet with visiting dignitaries.
Even after all these years
people still want to see
the miracle.

But the shoes I keep covered up.
Charming and I have a deal, you see.

Last week though
an ambassador from a far away land
made so bold as to ask to see the slippers.
"I'm sorry," I told him, "I show them to no one now."
"But Highness," he whined, "I have come so far, endured so many
trials to get to your kingdom for a glimpse
just a glimpse
of the magic slippers."

I could feel my lips pull themselves into a tight, wicked smile.

"Well then, maybe just a glimpse," I said.

I had the room cleared

made him kneel before me

all eagerness and anticipation.

Then

my eyes intent on his face.

I slowly raised the hem of my gown.

The crystal shoes are still as clear and sparkling

as the day I first put them on.

But

the feet that inhabit them

are two over-ripe, petrified bananas

black to the ankles.

The ambassador ran screaming from the palace.

I laughed.

Charming, however, was not amused.

"Cindeee," he said, his voice rising on the second syllable as it does when he's disappointed in me, "Cindeee, I thought we had a deal."

I told him I was sorry

but I wasn't really.

I get so little amusement these days.

Besides, I did the ambassador a service

freeing him from his illusions.

I suppose

with a length of rope from the royal stables

or a dose of poison from the royal dispensary

or a pistol from the royal armoury

I could end everyone's illusions

once and for all.

But why would I do a thing like that?

I'm a goddamn miracle. •



They pulled everything they thought would be of value in those sleds, crafting them from their lifeboats, and it showed how mad they were.

Taste of Life

Paul Bartel

They were already half-mad by the time I found them. Half-mad from eating poisoned food and being stuck, living on top of each other, dreaming of release and a return to the green lands of home. They did not linger with their ships, once they had made their decision to leave. Usually spring is not the time when I get to eat well—I feed best during the winter—but this spring would be different. They were desperate, and desperation is the smell of prey.

They straggled out across the ice, heads down against the wind, backs bowed against their burdens. I dogged their heels, watching their faces grow gaunter underneath their beards and their hands blacken from frostbite, wondering how they would taste, these minds so different from what I had known since the beginning of time. They were still new to me then, these light skinned people with all their tools and equipment. Others of their kind had been coming and going for some years among the Inuit, exploring, trading, learning. Their ships were full of strange and wonderful things—devices to make music, food in metal boxes, guns. I discovered a whole new world when they came. They had such curiosity and desire for new things. In this way, they were almost as hungry as I.

Anticipation filled me as they dragged their sleds away from the icebound ships. They pulled everything they thought would be of

value in those sleds, crafting them from their lifeboats, and it showed how mad they were. They filled those sleds with things that made no sense and had no value for their survival. But so attached were they to their things that they brought with them spoons and large bundles of paper filled with their stories. It would not matter, in the end. They had little food, and the loss of their precious Captain Franklin left them weak and divided. I had been around for months, the unseen member of their expedition. I had learned a great deal about them. Patience is a virtue to the hunter, and mine was about to be rewarded.

Three men left the main group to go hunting for seal. One collapsed, overwhelmed by exhaustion and the poison that had seeped into their food from their metal boxes. He cried for help from his companions, but I had already struck. A whisper in their minds, ever so gentle, close enough to make them think it was their own thoughts. I taught them what I had taught so many others: Fresh meat, right here, right now... warm from the bone. No need to hunt.

The two of them looked at each other for a long time, and I could feel their desire. Even their fallen member knew what was coming. He lay still and quiet. It felt sweet to see them, without a word, grab their knives and start carving.

The meat, torn from the body in dripping hunks was still warm, and we stuffed it in our mouths together, chewing the gristle and muscle, tasting the blood's tang. Oddly flavoured, tainted by heavy metals from their own poisoned food, but still the taste of life. The same as I had always known. Together we gorged. Sweet strips of flesh, the savour of final surrender. We laughed and laughed then, and they knew me. And I knew them.

I let my first two rejoin the main group. No explanations were needed, because men died from their weakened state all the time now. When only a few were around, it was easy to convince them they needed fresh meat as I had done with the hunters. But my greatest achievement came from convincing their leader they needed to do this to survive.

Crozier was his name. He knew for a long time what was happening, but refused to partake. I kept working on him, whispering their doom in his mind, convincing him they had to eat their dead to be strong enough to survive. He dreamed of a return to his green England and its bustling cities. They dreamed large, these people—dreams of not just survival, but of comforts and wealth.

We struggled for a long time in his dreams and thoughts. He saw what became of the men who had eaten with me; their eyes went dead

and they saw everything that breathed as food, something that would fill the holes inside of them. As much as he resisted, he knew the truth—he had no hope of seeing home again except through those eyes.

Late one night I drew him out from his huddled shelter beside one of the sleds to watch some of his men begin their feast on one of the fallen. They chewed slowly—their teeth hung loose in their heads—but they were eating, and it was fresh. Crozier's bile rose, imagining the taste.

It is not the taste of death, I laughed. It is the taste of life. I shared its flavour with his mind, and he salivated.

When he finally condoned it, encouraged it, partook of it, I had them all. They ate with me, or they were eaten. It made no difference. I consumed them all, body and soul.

They died from weakness, from cold, from accidents. They fought with each other, and killed when one looked too weak or too threatening. Instead of going onto the ice to hunt, they hunted amongst themselves now. They killed over scraps of clothing, for a better pair of boots, and fed when they were done. I laughed and fed with them. We were fast friends. It was the best hunt I had ever had.

We lingered out on the ice. It was easy for us now, with food close to hand. They snarled and fought each other over the choicest parts of the meal. When the drive to continue their journey became strong again—when we were sated—we would move on again, leaving behind the frozen dead and the strange things they had brought from their world. They walked in my world now.

The only close call came towards the end. They found an Inuit family, and begged for help. Much to my chagrin, they had an Angakut, a shaman of the people. He could have sent me away, banished me back to the ice to seek new prey. I kept back, but he could smell me on the white men and taste me in the air.

The family hunted seals for them. But that was it. The Inuit worried for their own survival, and my presence scared them. The old and weak Angakut could not find the strength to drive me away. They tried to warn the English about me, but none were left among the English that knew the language anymore. "Atshen! Atshen!" was all the Angakut could say in the end, trying to warn them I was in their midst. Crozier sobbed as he watched the family walk away.

They all knew by then, of course. They knew what they had become, if not my name. Even if they found rescue, their souls belonged to me now. They would not be able to see themselves without seeing me

behind their eyes. I consumed them, even as they consumed each other.

It would end in a place that would later be called Starvation Cove. They were hardy, these folk. I never expected them to come so far. They had at last reached the river they hoped would take them home—except the boats they had used to drag supplies all this distance could no longer be used in the water. The constant pull over ice and rock had battered holes and cracks into their hulls. They had neither the tools, materials, or skills required to make them whole again.

They could do nothing. They waited for death there, watching each other, falling on the corpses like wolves. We ate well, those last few days. At last there were only two left, and they would go each day to watch the sea and hope to see a ship that could save them from their fate. When one became hungry enough, he turned on his fellow for a last meal. We ate together, that one last time.

It was the best feast in all my long years. It also came close to being my last feast. Over time, even finding one person to dine with became difficult. More and more, the Europeans came, better prepared each time. Hunger became more and more rare even among the Inuit with the tools they acquired. I began to know desperation myself, spending the years chasing across the ice, looking for someone to eat with. I twisted on myself, gnawing on my own existence, left to watch as hunger—the type of desperate hunger I needed—went away.

Just as I leave a mark on those I feed on, they leave their mark on me. The English I had dined with had shown me new types of hunger, not just the hunger for food and survival but also a hunger for more. A hunger for fame and fortune and things. For them, these tasted as sweet as life. They came to my lands for no reason of survival or need, but out of want for those things. I had felt it, when I dined with them. It was the same. As long as they took out of that desperate longing, I could feed.

That hunger kept driving them, as mine kept driving me. As they had ranged further to find what they wanted, so did I. They kept coming, the English and others, seeking out what they hungered for—gas and oil, diamonds and coal. So I showed them what they sought, and fed with them, consuming them while they consume the earth. When the earth is consumed... well, the desperation will start again. So will the hunger.

I can always eat. •

An Enchantment, With Apples

Tony Pi

When you loathe your skin and bones, be bold

Procure an apple of glass, or commission one
Spin it atop polished silver, and chant *kallisti*
Gaze deep. Coax her image from its dizzying core
Shun your wizened reflection

Remember her face. Covet her youth
Find her, finesse her, foster her innocence
Shield her from lust but not love's yearning
Let but one suitor live

Await her heart's gift—an apple for teacher
Decline. Again. On her third plea, accept
Thank her, but insist to share
She must not refuse

Slice the fruit crosswise. Expose the pentacle of seeds
Feed her the sweeter half, and devour your bitter share
Kiss her good night, and watch her sleep
Her beauty will soon be yours

Join her at the witching hour, slip into her orchard dream
Pluck a Golden Hesperides or Norse Idunnian
Smuggle myth into sunlight, and ripen it into reality
Let no serpent catch you

Hold the purloined pomme in your sinister hand
Pare the honey skin from its translucent flesh
Carve your face into the solid dream
A crude likeness will suffice

Sew it a body. The last stitch must prick your thumb
Thrust the wound and eidolon into brine
Let blood and pain seal her fate
Do not falter now

As the apple-head shrivels, so atrophies she
Age bleeds from you. Savour her youth
Become her, lure her lover close
His kiss completes you

Be bold, or forever stay skin and bones •



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She fixed her eyes on him, blue behind thin silver wire-rim glasses and for the first time, he noticed the flickering behind the lenses.

Because We Hear Voices

John Bowker

From the moment the funeral began, there was nothing he wanted more than to leave.

The minister's eulogy was lost in the silences where Sonya's pulse had been. Words from a stranger for a person he could not recognize, he was surrounded by faces staring blankly from the pews as autumn winds battered panes of stained glass gone dead in the gray autumn twilight. His infant daughter fussed and whimpered in his sister's arms, the sound thin and meaningless. He was the only person in the room who didn't need to see the coffin or hear the hollow solicitudes from the minister to know his wife was gone. A piece of him, a quarter-inch in front of his eyes, had gone dark.

His sister had handled the funeral arrangements with her own sense of propriety. People collected at his house after the service, filling the rooms with a disorienting clamor of noise and food and false cheer. He knew them all; relatives, friends, an old lover, but none could penetrate the sudden void of his new reality. Mumbled words of sympathy, hugs consisting of touched cheeks and widely spaced feet, they were witnesses to the disaster but not part of it. His parents arrived from their opposite directions, his mother plucking at the frame of his eyeglasses clucking her tongue.

"You're still wearing those toys, Daniel. You've got a daughter now. You've got to get serious."

He stared at her, speechless. His sister Karyn stepped between them, offering the bundled baby like a lifeline.

"Do you want to hold her now?"

He shook his head. Taking his elbow, she drew him away from his parents, and Sonya's family who had barely approached him all afternoon.

"They can all see you're still wearing the hardware. You've barely touched Allison since..." She hesitated.

"It confuses them, Daniel. They don't understand."

They didn't. And he no longer had the means to explain it to them.

Instead he left the house, the soft *schlush* of dry autumn leaves under his shoes as he made his way across the darkened yard. A tumbled border of farmer's stones rose against the hills in the back, a gate marking the entrance to the acres of conservation land that stretched out beyond the edges of their property.

Standing at the gate, he adjusted the "toys". Eyeglasses, the earbuds, a wrought silver band pushed up over the sleeve of his funeral suit.

"Sing to me," he said.

He took his first steps out into the trees and his wife's voice came to him out of the past.

Neither of them had been looking. It had been a blind date set up by friends based on little more than their mutual incomprehensibility. Daniel was a blacksmith, a metal artist sharing a Cambridge apartment with an ever-shifting assortment of software engineers, students, and couch-surfers on their way to somewhere else. Sonya wandered the halls of MIT doing something her friends understood even less than Daniel's talk of swage blocks and heart punches. Their circles intersected and the two people who didn't date suddenly found themselves doing just that.

Their shy initial dinner conversation evolved quickly into a deep exploration of each other's work, for they were both people for whom there was little else. He described to her the primal satisfaction of his art, the shaping of earth, air, water, and fire. She had nodded in understanding; her own work was another form of witchery with its own pagan satisfactions. Even as she listened, her cameras mapped his face, playing synaesthesia into her ears as glossaries of iron-smithing and metalwork appeared before her eyes to better translate his excited monologue. Her hands shifted constantly just below the edge of the table. He ignored it for some time, but finally, curiosity got the better

of him and he asked what she was doing.

"I'm recording," she said. She showed him the dangling assortment of breadboard circuits and batteries wired to the inside lining of her vest, and the bracelet that read the positions of marks on her hands, translating the movements into text. She fixed her eyes on him, blue behind thin silver wire-rim glasses and for the first time, he noticed the flickering behind the lenses.

"It's sort of like a giant mood ring. Heartbeat, respiration, galvanic skin response, a few other bits and pieces. The lab is logging everything."

She seemed perfectly healthy to him. "Are you sick?"

Her smile was sheepish. "That depends on who you ask. The correlation between your physical state and how you're feeling emotionally is well established."

She took a sip of wine, and grinned.

"There's a pool at the lab betting that since this is a blind date, the entire dataset will be one big flatline."

He cocked his head. "So, how am I doing then?"

Her computer rig was inconsequential in size, the vest and wires presenting no real obstacle. Still, she agreed to his request to remove it as they made love that first night. Daniel was as confident as any man could be in such circumstances, but he simply didn't feel ready for quite so large an audience.

They were married a year later but it had been an afterthought; their real partnership began on that first evening. She made the tools, meshes of conducting polymer, scanners that mapped the lines of the human face, cloth that changed color in response to the wearer's biofeedback. He in turn made them beautiful, adding grace to her designs, the metals her research grants bought them leaving the forge transformed into the future. Bulky industrial forms evolved into a slim, organic elegance and strangers rarely noticed that the couple was wearing anything out of the ordinary. Friends knew, and while they treated them as they would any other married couple, there was one exception.

They were banned from playing poker together by every friend they knew.

Every close relationship develops its own language, a system of words and signals, incomprehensible to outsiders. No matter how good, cues are missed, information cast into space with no receiver. Sonya's work was at its core about retrieving those lost signals. As the two of them went about their day, scanners read the edges of their mouths, reading the upward twitch of inner amusement, the sudden

downturn of exhaustion or the surprised curl of laughter. Their tensions were mapped, the data sorted and tumbled through filters and interpreters across the ether to each other's interface. When he burned himself working at the forge, she felt it immediately. His fingers always knew the right places to scratch. They could no longer lie to each other so they stopped trying altogether. They used words little and needed them less.

The night they conceived Allison, he knew. They stripped in a small clearing off the path in the dusky light of an approaching storm and made love on a sleeping bag, sharp sticks driving ignored into tender areas as the sunset teased new colors from her skin and the delicate tracteries of circuitry. Even as his own pleasure built, he was wired hard into hers, her breathing, her heat flashing across the spectrum in his lenses, her pulse thundering in his ears until he no longer could hear the storm. Insensate and omniscient, neither of them knowing which contained the other, he came as the first spatters of rain splashed across their bare skin, knowing this time would be the one.

Nine months later, he was the first to know something was wrong.

She had mapped the forest during the previous summer, hours spent wandering under the trees becoming a geography of her own invention, peaks and valleys transformed into arpeggios and crescendos, the tone and mood programmed to shift with the time and seasons. As Daniel walked the darkened trails he encountered these night mappings, his pace slowly synching to the intricacies of her digital composition. Climbing through the treeline into clear sky, a digital orchestra soaring in one of Sonya's favorite places, he reached out with what little religion he had left, tried to feel some vestige of her presence. As the music faded, there was only silence and darkness as his glasses painted green across his retinas, completing the outlines of spring constellations. For the first time since his wife's death, he finally allowed himself to weep.

The house was dark when he returned from the forest, his good shoes ruined, the rooms smelling of cold cut plates and stale sympathy. His sister snored softly on the couch, the plastic shell of a baby carrier on the coffee table by her head. Moving quietly, he drew a quilt over her sleeping form before taking the bassinet and carrying it into the kitchen.

The kitchen table was piled with baked goods he would never eat. He cleared a spot and placed the carrier carefully, watching the slow, almost imperceptible movement of the child's breathing as she slept.

Her little chest rose and fell rapidly, so quiet it was inaudible over the empty hum of the feeds from Sonya.

He hadn't turned them off. They listened, waiting, like antenna turned toward the sky for signals that would never come. The antique wooden clock on the kitchen wall ticked over toward midnight and he sat, watching his daughter sleep, a tiny spark of warmth unaware of the emptiness between them. He hesitated, and then lifted her from the carrier, holding her to his chest in the dark.

He hadn't slept almost at all since Sonya's death. He'd hidden in whatever distraction he could create, burying himself in performing the many small rituals required to convince the outside world a loved one is dead. Tonight there was nothing left. No credit card companies to call, no friends, only the sleeping child and a life as the last speaker of a dead language. For a moment, he was struck by the fear that this was all there would ever be. The thought paralyzed him.

His despair did not go unnoticed. A fierce wail rose from within the blankets in his arms. He panicked, jerking upright and the crying intensified, louder and more insistent, an instinctual recognition of things not right with the world.

"Relax," he whispered. "Relax. It's going to be all right."

Recognizing the cause of her distress, he forced himself to take his own advice, slowing his breathing and letting out the tension in his shoulders. For a long instant, the infant's cries continued unabated. Then, gradually, the sobbing subsided.

"Daniel?" Karyn's voice came from the living room, "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine," he breathed.

When he was sure the child had drifted back to sleep, he carried her downstairs to Sonya's workroom in the basement. He had received a signal.

He had never done the delicate work before. His hands weren't suited to it, broad, gnarled, and blistered from the forge. Still, that night they worked with a small grace, following Sonya's designs. Dawn was breaking when he finally returned upstairs. He laid Allison gently into the cradle by his bedside, undressed and climbed into bed himself. He used only his own side of the bed, and it would be months before his subconscious would allow his legs to steal into the territories that had once been Sonya's. But that night, for the first time in days he was able to sleep. In his ears, beating strongly like a signal from a civilization thought lost, pulsed the sound of his daughter's heart. •

"Here. Become a blue jay."
The feathers were bright
blue, black and white,
going out in all directions
like a pinwheel.

Festival

Fiona Heath

She didn't want to go, she hardly knew them, and yet she went.

The air in the grand-van was stuffy and sweet. Meren peered around the big black man tapping a festive rhythm on a drum to see Liam in the front passenger seat. Liam was talking intensely to Crystal, the driver; Meren caught the words "Marxism died years ago, but political paganism is a true re-birth..." but was distracted by his hands. Liam had strong hands, with long, shapely fingers; he used them well, emphasising his words with elegant, passionate gestures. Meren had been captivated by those hands in her sociology of religion class.

As she settled back into her seat along the wall of the van she tried not to elbow the blonde beside her, who she thought might be Summer, but perhaps was just Suzie, and she didn't want to use either, in case she was wrong. Byways, Summer/Suzie was holding hands with her companion, a tall warrior kind of woman in absurd patchwork overalls, and Meren didn't dare interrupt.

Kicking quietly at the pile of paper mache puppet heads, glittery masks, coloured cloths, and painted sticks in the middle of the van floor, Meren tried to find a place for her feet, nervously breathing in the sweet smoke coming from the back of the van. Liam had introduced her to everyone, but so quickly all she had heard was Summer/Suzie,

Crystal, and that one of the three vaguely Asian men sitting across from her was Jackson and one of the clouds in the jumble at the back was maybe Charlotte. And Liam had pushed her in and then sat in the front and had never once looked back and she was too hot and had no idea where they were going because Liam had assumed she had heard of the Festival and she hadn't wanted to look dumb, naïve and small towny, even though she was. She had thought the Festival was at Rockwood or Guelph, he had mentioned a park, but they had been in the van far too long. Her roommate had warned her not to come, but she hadn't listened.

"Do you want a drink, Meren? Are you thirsty?" One of the Asian men who wasn't Jackson was offering her the shiny lid of a thermos. Meren leaned forward to see if Liam was watching and would give her a reassuring nod but the drummer was in the way and all she could see were Liam's hands against the night sky. She looked at the young man, his soft brown face open and friendly. He held out the metal cup.

Meren nodded and reached out for the cup, grabbing too quickly and splashing her jeans. Embarrassed, she looked down and brushed off her knees, then held the cup to her mouth and swallowed quickly, willing herself not to cough too hard.

She looked up, surprised.

"It's strawberry juice and oxygen water, with real maple syrup. Pure and simple. Nice, eh? I'm Sam."

Draining the cup, Meren wiped her mouth, smiled, and handed it back.

Summer/Suzie broke her embrace with the warrior and offered Meren and Sam a cheerful grin. "Ever been to the Festival?"

Meren shook her head.

The blonde woman gently touched her hand. "You'll love it. There's nowhere else to celebrate the solstice. Pagans come from all over North America to become part of the great rhythm and cleanse the land. The Goddess loves us all."

Meren breathed deeply and asked, more timidly than she hoped, "How long before we're there?"

Summer leaned forward and addressed the drummer. "Hey Caleb, how much further to MacGregor?"

Without stopping the drumbeat that filled the van, Caleb said "One hour down, one hour to go."

"We brought extra – pick one out if you want." Summer gestured at the pile on the floor then returned her attention to the warrior woman, murmuring "Solstice time, the Goddess loves us all."

Meren closed her eyes, trying to control her breathing.

MacGregor Point Provincial Park.

She was trapped in a van with crazy people. She had thought a summer solstice festival would be a light-hearted celebration of summer and life and hopefully some kind of flirty thing with Liam and instead it was a trip into a radioactive wasteland inviting inevitable and painful death. Cleanse the land? With what—strawberry juice? That meltdown in the Ukraine was 75 years ago and still dangerous and it was only 15 years since the Bruce Nuclear Power Plant went down just to the south of MacGregor. No one lived within 100 kilometres of the place. That part of Lake Huron glowed at night. Everyone said so. Meren sniffed very hard so as not to cry. What was she doing here with all these stupid people?

She sniffed again. It was her own fault, for falling for Liam's hands. If his hands hadn't been so beautiful when he announced the all-beings meeting to their sociology class she would never have gone to the meeting; if she hadn't gone to the meeting she would never have volunteered to do the see-mailing for the next one and she and Liam's hands would never have gone out for chai and his hands wouldn't have asked her what she thought of the group and she wouldn't have talked about rhythms. Rhythms! If it hadn't been for those graceful articulate hands she would never have worn the one goddess necklace she owned so that Liam's hands assumed she was a pagan and so didn't ask if she was so she didn't say she wasn't, even though she was really a Lutheran and clearly not a very good one, and if his hands hadn't said you must come to the festival, she wouldn't have. Meren's hands tugged at her white cotton sweater, feeling hot and doomed.

Meren was concentrating so hard on not being afraid that she started with a shock when the van stopped. The back doors of the van opened and the jumble of people jumbled out, whooping. Warrior Woman and Summer/Suzie began passing sticks, cloths, and masks out the door. The red robes slithered out, except Sam, who bent down and scooped up a red squirrel mask made of paper maché, and said, "Are you sure you don't want a mask?"

Unable to say yes or no, Meren looked at Sam and then down at the floor.

Sam squinted at her in the flickering light flowing in from the open door, then reached down and grabbed a pile of feathers from Summer's last load.

"Here. Become a blue jay." The feathers were bright blue, black

and white, going out in all directions like a pinwheel. Meren nodded her thanks.

"If you're wearing something underneath, I'd leave the sweater here. It can get pretty hot out there." Sam smiled, then slipped out the door.

Thinking of the radiation, Meren nodded again. She pulled off her sweater as Caleb lumbered past with his drum. He had stopped drumming, but the beat was still there, louder now, coming from outside. Crouched there in her blue tank top, the last in the van, Meren closed her eyes, desperately regretting the impulse to go without a bra. At least she looked like Summer in a tank and jeans. She slipped on the blue jay mask, the feathers stroking her skin, covering her entire face. Glad of its protection, she climbed out of the van.

Waves of drumbeats and whistles, shouts and songs rolled over her, pressing her back against the van. Sweet and pungent smells surrounded her—smoke, apple, trees, and others she couldn't identify. Squinting against flashes of light, Meren could see a confusion of bodies and colour. People were carrying gen torches and solar flares, even real flaming branches. Meren had never seen open flame, except for candles. Hadn't it been banned for the last ten years? The orange flame arced up into the darkening sky where pinks and blues were dissolving into night. The crowd, milling and buzzing, stood on the asphalt of an old road slicing through the forest. There was a very tall, skinny man with strangely short arms; her face flushed as she realised he was on stilts. The huge brown bear and rainbow dragon towering over everyone—they were giant puppets. She tried to count the hundreds of people but got lost in all the colours. Blues and greens and reds and yellows and purples, swirling together. She had never seen so many colours all in people size before. Some of the colours were the colour of people, naked except for masks and body paint. She looked away, embarrassed, and saw Summer just within the trees, no longer wearing her tank and jeans, being painted with a studious urgency by the warrior.

Summer's full breasts and plump belly became a monarch butterfly, orange and black and dusted with pollen. The butterfly twitched and stretched and shook as if she had just climbed out of her cocoon. Meren jumped guiltily when Liam spoke.

"Great mask, Meren," his hands said. They held themselves out to her and she took them with wonder, swirling deep blue lines covering the brown skin, flowing up under his loose hemp shirt.

"Crystal's got her paints out, if you want something on your arms." Liam's hands gently disengaged and gestured to the front of the van. Meren moved around the van, sensing Liam's blue hands behind her, but when she arrived in front of Crystal, sprawled on the passenger seat, the blueness was gone. Meren held out her arms to the small woman, who grabbed Meren's right hand and in quick, assured strokes, painted bands of bright blue, curves and leaps, on her arms. Meren bent her neck as Crystal put blue on her shoulders. The painter filled in the spaces with splashes of white and black, finishing with black claws on the back of Meren's hands.

"There you go, Blue Jay. Keep your arms away from your sides for a few minutes to dry." Crystal patted Meren on the bum. "Little bird..."

Meren looked back at the painter.

"Vision this," Crystal smiled kindly, the smile of someone who knew more than you which Meren hated from professors and was worse coming from someone her own age. "Vision this, delete Liam. He has a part to play and he gets a little full of himself. Just enjoy yourself."

Meren returned to her sheltered spot at the back of the van but the doors were closed and she stood there, wondering, arms held out stiffly, as if considering flight. From the humming, drumming mass Sam emerged, a red robed squirrel with twinkly brown eyes.

"Great designs. Crystal's good, isn't she?"

Meren nodded and smiled a little, behind her feathers. Here she was, a blue jay talking to a squirrel. She looked past the squirrel to see if she could spot Liam in the crowd.

"Look, Meren," said the squirrel in his deep voice, "I just want you to know the Festival is a secure zone."

Secure, thought Meren, but we're being radiated, right now, can't you tell, and she lifted her arms a little, as if Crystal's designs represented the radiation.

"Nothing will happen to you that you don't want to happen."

But I wanted to kiss a butterfly, thought Meren, and I don't want that to happen, do I? Blue Jays don't hang with butterflies.

"Just let yourself be, you connect?"

No, she thought, panic rising, the network's down squirrel face.

"Feel the earth, stay centered, be open."

I need my sweater, thought Meren. I should really put my sweater back on because it's getting pretty cold out here. She turned to the van but the door was locked so she turned back to the squirrel who was watching her with his big brown head tilted to one side.

"It's all positive energy, girl. We're doing good work." he said, and lifted off his head, exposing Sam for a moment. "Trust yourself and you'll be fine." His smile was warm. Then Sam disappeared back into the squirrel. "Enjoy! This is a festival! You'll see me if you need me! Just look for the red head!" The squirrel's head bobbed up and down for a moment, and then it was gone into the crowd, a bright spot of red dancing.

Wait, thought Meren. She said it out loud, "Sam, wait, please!" but her voice drowned in all the noise. "Come back!" She looked around the side of the van, but Crystal was gone. She moved around the edge of the crowd, darting between purple flowers and red foxes and green robes, looking for Sam, for Liam, for anyone. Stumbling over a tree root, she stopped and turned her back on the dark forest, looking firmly at the busy crowd.

Hopping from one foot to another, Meren stood, shivering. Was she hot or cold? She couldn't tell. Quick breaths hurt her lungs. Could you feel radiation enter you? Everyone was so cheerful—were they insane? How could playing dress-up heal the earth? Tears ran down her cheeks, she pressed the mask to her face to absorb them. Did birds cry? She had no idea what blue jays were like. Weren't they loud and obnoxious and extinct?

Meren stood between the crowd and the forest for what seemed like a very long time, watching jugglers and acrobats, giant puppets and drummers, costumed and painted people, laughing and singing and dancing. Wafts of, not heat exactly, but warmth came from the group. Her tears stopped and her breathing slowed. She swayed to the beat that was smacking against the asphalt and jumping through the crowd. The rhythm of the drums was still ragged, at times catching and pulsing with her heart, at other times pushing her away. Perhaps if this was the festival it wasn't so bad, just a bunch of people in silly outfits, hanging out, although surely they could have picked a better location. Panic flooded her body but she put her claws on her hips and tapped her foot on the ground, determined to enjoy herself. Might as well make my last healthy night on earth fun, she thought, sniffing defiantly.

She looked for Liam, but could not see him in the swirling movement and then Snow White appeared in front of her and offered her an apple from an old wicker basket. Stepping quickly back, Meren was stopped by the solidness of a tree trunk. She darted her eyes towards Snow White, who became Crystal in a red dress and a white apron.

Not wanting to appear rude, she took the apple and held it awkwardly in her hand.

Crystal Snow White laughed, "It's clean, girl. Organic—nothing but the goodness of the apple. Veraciously!"

Blushing, Meren pushed her feathers up, bit the fruit tentatively, catching skin and a hint of crispness. The small bite filled her mouth with the redness of apple so she bit again and again and again until she had torn all but the seeds away and into herself.

Surprised, she tossed the core into the straggly bushes beside her. As she wiped her mouth and adjusted her feathers, a Summer butterfly and a Warrior tree, all gnarled brown cloth and green skin, tugged at her arms and drew her into the crowd. They were singing about oaks and ash and elder, fox and frog and racoon, orchid and lily and rose, and Meren caught the melody and hummed along, skipping delicately, moving with the crowd, flowing now along the road between the trees, lights shimmering and flickering, drums beating, feet pounding and jumping, voices singing, colours twirling, and Meren dancing and laughing with a butterfly and a tree until she caught sight of Liam and stopped.

He was a stag.

Antlers had sprung up from his head, three pronged, painted with deep blue designs. His chest was now bare, covered with dense blue curves and dots and spirals swirling down into his dark brown aztec shorts, skin tight. Liam danced and whooped and yelled, his hands competing with his antlers for the stars in the sky.

Amazed, Meren pushed forward through the crowd to the open space in which Liam performed. She stood at the edge and watched, hugging herself. The stag pranced over. He bowed, low and deep, tipping his antlers at her, his expression hidden by paint and flickering light. Meren bobbed, arms flapping, an awkward curtsy. The stag nodded and Meren laughed. A voice called from the other side of the circle and the stag danced away.

He had no shoes on; his feet were as strong and elegant as his hands. Kicking off her sandals, she pressed her feet into pine needles and asphalt, green scents soaked into her heels, rough stone resisted her advances. Dancing a little, toes only on the road, she looked for Liam, smiling in delight. He was gone and she pushed forward into the people and animals, anxiously darting her head about until she saw his antlers outlined in the light of a flickering branch. She squawked for joy and beat her wings.

Falling into step beside Caleb, who wore a long orange skirt and many necklaces made of pinecones and shells, his face covered in white and orange dots and lines, she clapped her hands to the rhythm of his drum, watching the antlers prancing ahead. Caleb smiled at her, teeth gleaming, and she smiled back. Breathing deeply, she smelt his sweat and the leather of his drumstrap damp against his skin. She breathed in the pine trees, the dirt, the stones, and the faint scent of water. Her necklace bumped against her chest and she reached up and clasped the metal goddess, tasting the ridges with her hands. The goddess was cold and solid and round. She dropped it back between her breasts, hands stretching out to the dance, only to be caught up in red paws, and she skipped away with a squirrel, jumping and curving through foxes and jesters and gods and orchids. They danced until she had to stop, dizzy and out of breath.

A racoon came up and hugged her and she thought how strange, she didn't know any racoons, but perhaps the blue jay did, so she accepted the embrace.

The giant bear lumbered by, nodding to all the creatures reaching up to pat its warm fur. Big brown eyes glared down at the small blue jay and she was frightened and flew into the trees, perching at the margin of the crowd, which continued to move along the road, dirt now, and smaller. The rocks hurt her feet so she flew on through the forest, laughing as she saw a tree embrace a butterfly in the undergrowth.

At the edge of the rainbow of people once more, she stopped, taking in huge breaths, feeling the air move through her lungs and blood. She had never been aware of air before. Her arms and legs seemed to be thinking instead of her head. Hands stretched out to hug a tree. The pulse of the drum rose out of the cedar, thrumming from deep underground, moving into her and out of her. She couldn't feel anything except the drum, for a moment she tried to fight it off, but it was like fighting her own heartbeat. The scent of lake water grew stronger. The rainbow passing in front of her swirled and grew brighter, then scattered into droplets of colour as people split up onto small paths among the trees, most moving on towards an open space she could feel just up ahead. The drums called her, *Meren, Meren, blue jay, Meren, blue jay, blue jay*, and Meren sighed once and let go of the cedar. The blue jay flew towards the clearing.

The bird landed just outside the circle made by torches planted into the sand. Pushing lightly through the crowd, she peered between the flares, and squawked once. There was the stag. There was a woman

too, shimmering in green and gold clothes. The woman and the stag circled one another, round and round within the lights, coming closer and backing away, a dance without touch. The blue jay was frightened, and beat her wings quickly; afraid of the fire lights, afraid of the woman, afraid, even, of the stag. The stag pranced, antlers reaching high, his hands signing a story to distract the goddess, his fingers tracing light onto the sky. The bird could see the stag was tired, his knees beginning to tremble, she knew he would have to submit. Anger flared.

How dare the Goddess take the Stag!

Darting between two torches, she flew at the woman, squawking loudly, pecking and pecking.

The drumbeat staggered and broke its rhythm.

The stag pulled her roughly away and thrust her into the arms of a squirrel. Clutching her arm, the goddess lay on the sand, her breath a harsh sound in the growing silence.

Meren looked at Sam, looked at Liam, looked at the woman on the ground. Turning, she ran through the startled bodies of the gathering, pushing past the muttering and confusion until she reached the trees.

She sat in silence, the blue jay's mask tossed on the brown needles littering the ground; her head tucked into her knees, arms hugging each other. She sat and tried not to think.

She was clearly insane, out of control, it was time to join the zacks. The zacks had always made her feel uncomfortable if she sat beside one in a class, the slightly glassy look in their eyes, the way everything was always connecting, happy, absolutely netted. And now here she was, the one who was going to feel good and great and terrific all the time so she wouldn't have to remember how utterly, abysmally dumb she had just been. Safe! Why had she trusted Sam? Squirrels were known to be unreliable creatures, and she was definitely zipped. She wanted to go home. Perhaps she could hitchhike and then she would drop sociology of religion, she never liked it byways, and then she would never, ever, have to see Liam again. Tears soaked into her knees.

"Meren?" His voice was soft, questioning.

She became still, a frozen screen. Sam settled himself beside her, legs stretched out, back against a cedar. Meren felt him pull off his squirrel head.

"I'm mailing this is capacity weird for you?"

Meren bumped her nose against her knees in silent agreement.

"Worry not, you pack a good punch but she's fine. You just... changed the schedule. It will take longer to raise the energy up but everyone will be back dancing in a moment."

Silence sat between them. Meren raised her head a little.

"I... I... I wasn't... I was...."

"You were a blue jay."

It was more of an exhalation. "Yes."

"Good for you. Not everyone can get that far."

Meren could not stop the words. "Who would want to?"

Sam laughed. "It's a powerful gift—to go beyond yourself. Most people are too tangled in the network to get free that easily. It takes a lot of practice. You're becoming the world, be glad of it."

Meren looked at Sam to see if he was serious. His smile was kind. She turned away from him, looking up to see stars twinkling through the boughs of the tree. In the city, she hardly ever saw stars. Her fingers reached out and caressed the smooth, silky feathers of the blue jay mask.

"Not to make you feel like a file, but something like this happens every year. This year, it just happened to be you. Of course, this was probably the most spectacular interruption I've ever visioned." Meren could hear Sam holding back a smile. He looked away towards the lights and the crowd. "Liam won't even remember it tomorrow. The Stag and the Goddess never do."

I wish I was in my dorm room, experiencing a CD, thought Meren.

"Come on, Meren. Veraciously, no one minds."

Meren snorted.

"Well, some do. The energy won't be as strong as it could be. But we'll all feel better after. If you leave now, this will always feel terrible to you. Come back to the circle and let it flow." She shook her head. "Please. Feel how it ends. It's the way we get to the energy. To the healing. It's good work, you connect? This is the way. Don't be afraid of it."

"How can it help? How can this make any difference at all?" Her voice was low and passionate.

Sam was silent, spinning a pinecone with his right hand.

"I don't know. But since the emergency containment, nothing has been done, there's not enough money, not enough energy credits, not enough desire! All the gov and the corps can do is legalize and blame each other and refuse to do anything. The earth here has been devastated and this is better then just sitting around "experiencing" CDs, pretending there's not a nuclear wasteland beside us!" Sam's voice got

louder. Meren flinched a little. Sam inhaled sharply, and let the air out slowly, like a sigh or a prayer.

"I don't know if it helps the earth, but I believe it does. I hope it does, with all my heart and soul, I hope it does." Sam paused. "Even if it just helps us, well, we need the help, Meren. We need the hope. All of us do."

The two sat together under the trees, looking at the stars.

Meren cleared her throat. "I just want to be me. Nothing else. No blue jays."

"No confirmations, Meren. People are the energy in different ways. What happened to you—you're stronger than you think. So don't think. Let yourself be." Sam grinned as he got to his feet. "But stay beside me and perhaps I can keep you from flying." He held out a slim brown hand.

My Mother Believes in Voodoo

Rusti Leahy

she tries to shape her children into dolls
her acidic desires
force reflections to stray
before we solidify our own shape
we cringe before unvoiced expectations

iron sourced in volcanic earth
we fight pliable
all six of us have stretched
fantasies warped to her design
our bones broken
fit to her mannequin world

she cradles one of us
pokes needles into another
if that fails to suck us in her trance
she nurtures stranger orphans
uncannily resembling her own blood
in need and position
jealousy finest magnetic needle of all

stray souls eager for blood devotion
easily convert unbroken
appear to enjoy her sovereign zombie state

now an apprentice to logic and choice
i daily strip my straw and cloth body
i've woven myself in spider silk
smooth and impenetrable
from her size nine fine-pointed hooks

but i take no chances
keep my back turned to corners
i've hidden her pins her needles

she doesn't know what to do with me
or how to gather me
now that my marrow
no longer bends
i fit no living coffin
her final strike snaps steel •



Alberta
Foundation
for the Arts

You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

Their hero's welcome had included locked doors and full surveillance from the moment the life-pod was brought quietly aboard the patrol clipper inside Io's orbit for the long trip home.

When Johnny Comes Marching Home

Justin Stanchfield

Flecks of foam.

Matter circles round a point, a dance eternal. Stars form, a sisterhood of flame bound by gravity's sinuous thread. Round they swirled, clusters into galaxies, galaxies into universe, ever shifting, time unfolding, a luminescent rose red-shifting, birth and death, cycles upon cycles upon cycles...

Jake Holland hurried down the pale green corridor, hospital slippers unfit for running. He let the tickle deep in his chest guide him, an unformed sense of location that drew him down the broad stairs. The smell of urine and disinfectant met him. Ty Vernier stood above a toilet, arms braced against the wall, staring into the yellowed bowl. His eyes were unfocused, lost in the sad dreams he lived. Jake breathed a sigh of relief and crowded past the pair of gawking orderlies.

"What the hell's he looking at?" the nearest orderly, asked. "Never says a word. Just stares at the piss swirling round the bowl."

"Why didn't you bring him back to the ward?" Jake put his hand on Ty's shoulder, shocked at how hot the flesh beneath the ratty bathrobe felt. Ty shivered at the touch. Jake took that as a good sign.

Slowly, patiently, he guided Tyson Vernier out of the lavatory. Behind him, the orderlies grumbled about the job dropped in their overworked laps. Jake ignored them. *Not now*, he prayed. *Please, not now.*

"Where are we, Jake?" Ty's broad face twisted in confusion while Jake led him to his pale little room. He helped the big man into bed then tucked the rough blanket around him.

"We're home, Ty." Jake tried not to cry. "We're home."

Blue skies beckoned outside, morning sunlight against snow so clean it burned the eye. Jake stretched the stiffness from his neck. Three weeks after return and his body still railed against gravity's harsh grip. He smiled at the irony, how he had longed for weight throughout the long trip down from Jupiter. He glanced inside Ty's room, but the big man was snoring, curled on his side. Satisfied, he padded down the corridor toward the little nook they had claimed as their day-room.

Andrew 'Duck' Mihelic waited beside the picture window, cup in hand, a rueful grin spread across his homely face. Mihelic was a short man with enormous feet and strawberry-blond hair that refused to lie still. He blew on his cup, and the aroma of scorched coffee wafted down the hall.

"Another day in paradise, huh?" Mihelic turned back to the window. "Where do you suppose we are? Colorado? Utah?"

"No. Too cold." Jake stepped up beside him. Mountains rose in the distance, jagged peaks scraped clean by wind and avalanche. "Idaho, maybe. Or Montana. Might even be Alaska."

"Might as well be Siberia." Mihelic downed the last of the coffee and tossed the empty cup to the floor. "Christ, they won't even tell us what year it is."

"2096," Jake said quietly.

Mihelic turned, a trace of fear in his pale blue eyes. Jake had seen the look before. Even in the life-pod, their survival hanging by a thread, he had noticed the unending suspicion. Jake shrugged. He no longer cared if the former gunnery tech accepted him or not. Too much water had flowed under that bridge already. Behind them, someone coughed.

"Sergeant Holland?" A tall, uncomfortably thin woman with mousey brown hair stood in the corridor, clipboard in hand. Self-consciously, Andrea Leary pulled her long white coat closer together. "Could I have a word with you?"

"Sure." Jake nodded reluctantly, but Mihelic cut him off.

"When can we go home?"

"I'm not sure, Corporal Mihelic." Leary hid her fear as best she could. "I'm not in charge of that."

"Well, somebody is, and I want you to tell them we want out of this place."

"Back off, Duck," Jake said quietly.

Mihelic glared at him then stomped away. Jake ran a hand through his hair, surprised how far it had grown out since they had returned to Earth. "What can I do for you, Doctor?"

"Last night..." She cleared her throat. "What happened with Lieutenant Vernier? McCumber said he was staring at a toilet?"

"McCumber? He's the fat orderly on graveyard?"

She nodded.

"Ty had to go to the bathroom." Jake chose his words carefully. "Sometimes, he gets a little lost."

"Lost where, Sergeant? What does he see when he has one of his episodes?"

"I don't know." Jake paused. "He isn't dangerous. None of us are. We're just tired of sitting here when we should be with our families. After what we've been through, we deserve to go home."

"I'll pass your request along." Leary looked away. "I promise."

"Thanks." Jake tried to walk off, but Leary called him back.

"Sergeant, one more question? Lieutenant Vernier's door was locked from the outside. So was yours." She stepped toward him, stiff with fear. "How did you get out without triggering the alarms?"

For once, Jake didn't have an answer.

The dream that wasn't a dream took him again, the battle re-fought, lost and won a thousand times in the blink of an eye. The armada converged above Europa, using its weak gravity well to pivot. Ganymede and Calista were already gone, sacrificed to the invading beast. The Vortex waited for them as well. It pulsed heartbeat steady as if it held a life of its own. Perspective shifted now. Back inside the ship, panicked bodies running for the life-pods as their ship died around them. Three men stayed aboard. Three men held the line. Three against the universe. Vernier. Mihelic. Holland. Gatekeepers. Heroes. Fools.

Three men dove a crippled ship into the heart of the Vortex, infinity unfolding, possibilities limitless. One path opened and they took it.

The rest passes into legend.

Jake woke in the middle of the night, a fuzziness in his brain that refused to go away. He swung his feet off the bed and held them above the heat blowing up through the floor vent. Moonlight streamed through the small window. His hand shook as he fumbled for the reading lamp. He had enough of darkness to last several lifetimes.

"I'm losing it," he muttered. Jake thought about taking a walk but knew the door would be bolted. Their hero's welcome had included locked doors and full surveillance from the moment the life-pod was brought aboard the patrol clipper for the long trip home. Even that six-month ordeal hadn't been as bad as what they faced now. At least the crew of the cramped patrol were spacers. They understood some of it, unlike the grounders that held them now. First in Nevada, where the shuttle had landed, and now here, he had learned what it meant to be on display. Scrutiny had become the watchword, every action analyzed. Jake didn't blame them. He would have done the same thing were the tables turned. He glanced down at his feet.

A thin layer of mud covered them, clumps of black earth between his toes. Jake stared at them as if they weren't his own and shivered as the revelation washed over him. A quiet suburb, street-lights reflected in oily puddles. A sprawling beige house stood in front of him, the shrubs beneath the windows neatly trimmed.

It would be warm inside. Warm and dry and oh-so-normal. One little nudge and he would be through the clapboard walls, the wood and vinyl no more substantial than smoke. He could actually feel the heat from the fireplace, an extravagance in the otherwise modern house. Voices drifted out. A man. A woman. A boy. He saw her through the kitchen window, smiling as she stacked the supper dishes, breasts straining against her white blouse as she reached for the cupboards. She was still pretty, high cheekbones and a generous mouth, deep brown eyes that picked up the light. Her hair was lighter than Jake remembered, cut stylishly short above the collar. She looked like a television mom, and Jake laughed at the idea. For all he knew, no one even watched television anymore.

The man wandered into the kitchen and Jake pulled back, startled by the intrusion. A darkness hovered around him, something in his movements that threatened despite his wide smile. Jake's fists bunched. He shut his eyes and tried to think of something else but the memory wouldn't fade. Part of him still waited in the darkness outside

that kitchen, feet icy in the February mud, seething while the man put his arms around the woman's waist and drew her into a kiss. Jake remembered reaching through the wall, his fingertips slipping between the molecules until, as always, he lost his nerve and withdrew. Ashamed of himself, he stumbled back into the night while somewhere in that house a boy cried in his sleep.

Jake forced himself to breathe slowly. He had almost vanished, gone where Vernier went, that place no one walked out of again. The idea shattered glass-like against his tired mind. He glanced at the video camera hanging from the corner of his room. As unobtrusively as he could, Jake stepped into the closet-sized bathroom and closed the door, and wiped the mud from his feet.

The suits were waiting after breakfast, another day of interviews looming. Jake couldn't eat, the thought of more interrogation robbing even that brief pleasure. He left the cafeteria and walked, forcing his body to regain what it had lost during the long drift homeward. He hated being an invalid, an old man in a thirty-one year old body. It had been different when the armada shipped out. They accepted the weightlessness and endless calisthenics as part of the mission, eleven hundred souls hurling their fates against a common foe. They had been so brash, so young, ready to take on the worst the universe could throw at them. Now, he simply felt tired.

"Sergeant Holland?"

Jake spun around. Andrea Leary waited behind him. Jake started toward her but she backed up. He tried to put her at ease. "What can I do for you, Doctor?"

"They're ready for you." She seemed apologetic. "Do you need help finding the Administration Offices?"

"I know the way."

"Sergeant?" Leary stepped toward him, so close he could smell the fear on her skin. "Just so you know, there was a blank spot on Lieutenant Vernier's watch tape last night. We're calling it a technical glitch, but I'm sure you'll be asked about it."

"Thanks." Jake walked away, secretly pleased Leary had given him the warning. Any ally was a welcome change. He considered taking the stairs up to the third floor, but decided against it, the idea of arriving for the interrogation with his pulse racing and covered in sweat a poor idea. They would be suspicious enough without his adding fuel to their flame.

The elevator door slid open. Like the rest of the hospital, this floor was all but abandoned. He suspected less than twenty people attended them, exiles like himself, hidden from view in the closed facility. Rumors about places like this, hidden research complexes, had abounded. For once, Jake thought wryly, the rumors had proven true. He paused and straightened his bathrobe, wishing he had some real clothes, then stepped into the waiting room.

A Marine in gray cammies nodded politely, a rifle cradled in his hands. "They're almost finished, sir."

"Sergeant," Jake corrected him. "I've never been a sir." He sat down in one of the chairs and pretended not to listen to the conversation behind the thin walls. Mihelic was telling them anything they wanted to hear. Since their return the man had wasted no time distancing himself, as if he hadn't been part of the final assault. The marine at the door cleared his throat.

"Sergeant Holland? You can go in now."

The vinyl chair sighed as Jake rose. He passed Mihelic at the door. A bald man in a dark blue suit sat across the table. Behind him lay a picture window, the Venetian blinds closed.

"Sit down, Sergeant." The man didn't offer his hand. "This may take a while."

"I've got all the time in the world." Jake squinted at the ID badge clipped to the man's jacket. "Ask anything you want, Mr. Correlli."

"Let's go over your background." Correlli shuffled the papers in front of him. "Jacob Barnes Holland. Served six years in mech infantry before transferring to space defense. Saw action in Oman and Nigeria. Married four years prior to leaving Earth orbit."

"It was Yemen, not Oman," Jake interrupted. "And I was married five years, not four. What is it you really want to know?"

"Everything, Sergeant. I want to know everything." Correlli smiled coldly. "Eleven hundred and thirty-seven people left Earth. Sixty-eight ships. None survived. Now, six and a half years after the Battle of Europa, a single life-pod shows up with three survivors."

"The Battle of Europa? Is that what they call it now?" Jake shifted in the uncomfortable chair. "You failed to mention the threat we went out to meet was neutralized."

"Yes, it was." Correlli stared at him. "And you, Sergeant, failed to mention exactly how that was accomplished. According to Corporal Mihelic..." He took a pair of glasses from his breast pocket and put them on. "After the rest of the crew punched out, we, the Lieutenant,

Sergeant Holland and me, dove straight into the vortex and deployed the last of our nukes. I don't remember much after that except for hitting the pod and getting the hell out."

Jake shrugged. "That pretty well sums it up."

"So, you took a crippled ship into a possibly sentient energy vortex and detonated a nuclear warhead? Then, only after you have destroyed the threat, you and your companions abandon ship and pop out of nowhere six years later, your commander insane, your recorders utterly blank." Correlli leaned back. "A bit suspicious, wouldn't you say?"

"I wish I had a better explanation."

"Sergeant, let's not lie to each other. I know you have a better explanation. What I want to know is why you're hiding it?"

"Is there anything else?" Jake started to rise but Correlli raised his hand.

"Sit down, Sergeant. We've barely scratched the surface."

They served meatloaf at supper. Jake sat across the otherwise empty table from Mihelic. The orderlies and military personnel ate on the other side of the cafeteria, as far away as possible. The investigators were gone, carried back into heaven aboard a helicopter, a red tail-light fading into the evening stars. Ty, as always, remained in his room, unable, or unwilling, to feed himself. Jake took a bite and scowled. He laid his fork down and studied Mihelic.

Everything about the man annoyed him, the way he pounded the ketchup bottle to wring every last drop onto his plate or endlessly chewed his food, methodical as a cow waiting to be milked. Jake pushed his tray aside.

"How much did you tell them?"

Mihelic stopped chewing. "I didn't tell them anything that wasn't the truth."

"Yeah? Whose version?"

"Look, I'm sorry if they ran you through a wringer today. It's not my fault. I'm stuck here the same as you, so let's forget about it, okay?"

"No. It's not okay." Jake lowered his voice. "Correlli asked me a lot of questions he couldn't have known unless somebody told him."

"So maybe the Lieutenant was feeling chatty today." Mihelic carried his tray to the trash, then headed for the exit. Jake stopped him in the hall.

"Don't you walk away from me, mister."

"Listen, in case you haven't noticed we're not in the fucking corp anymore. Don't tell me what to do." Mihelic tried to brush past but Jake shoved him back. Mihelic's eyes widened. "That how you want it?"

You want to put this on a physical level?"

"I'm ready if you are." Jake wanted an excuse, any excuse, to hit Mihelic. "I don't appreciate being lied about."

"I never said a God damned word that wasn't the truth."

Jake's fist's clenched at his side. "Since when is it true that Vernier and me abandoned you?"

"From where I stood, that's exactly what happened. The two of you went somewhere, and I'll be damned if I'm taking a fall for whatever you did while you were gone. Did I tell Correlli what I know? Damned straight I did. I don't have anything to hide."

"You ignorant bastard." Jake shook his head in disbelief. "Maybe you haven't noticed but they've got Vernier so tranqed out he can't piss without help. How long until they come at you with the same needle?"

"Get away from me." Mihelic's voice rose. "Stay back."

"You listen and listen good." Jake pushed him against the wall. A ring of heat built around him, energy swirling. "Cross me again and I'll burn you to ash."

A crowd gathered behind them, orderlies and marines staring nervously at each other. Jake glared at Mihelic. He wanted to strangle him, to feel his throat bunched between his fingers, but instead he stepped back. Relief flooded over Mihelic's face and without another word the former gunnery tech stomped away. The crowd drifted back into the cafeteria, talking among themselves. Only Leary remained.

"Sergeant, is there a problem?"

Jake laughed. "What gave you that impression?"

"Can we step into my office?" A brief smile played over her lips. "Please?"

He followed her into a small room equipped with a desk and computer, the walls lined with bookshelves. She glanced out into the hall then closed the door. "Why did you mention tranquilizers to Corporal Mihelic?"

"Because I'm scared to death of them," Jake said truthfully.

"Why?"

"Maybe you haven't noticed but it's a little hard to stay in control when you're shot full of thorazine."

"We don't use thorazine anymore, Sergeant." Leary sat down behind her cluttered desk and nodded at the swivel chair beside the printer. "Being in control is important to you, isn't it, Sergeant?"

"Are you asking as a psychiatrist? Or as someone who's scared of me?" He tried to make it sound like a joke. Leary watched him, hands

on the desk in front of her.

"I'm trying not to be afraid of you, Sergeant."

"You could start by calling me Jake." He paused. "We aren't dangerous. We're the same men that left Earth six years ago."

"Are you?"

"We're trying to be."

Leary stared at her hands. "I know you can leave this place anytime you want." She put up a hand to keep him from talking. "I watched you vanish last night on the video monitor." She opened her desk drawer and took out a video disc.

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because, Sergeant... Jake. Believe it or not, I do trust you, even if you scare me shitless. I think you're the only thing keeping Vernier from doing something very wrong. And that scares me more."

Jake stared, shocked at how much the diminutive doctor seemed to understand. His pulse raced, his mouth suddenly so dry he couldn't speak.

"I'm going to lock this tape up," she continued. "I don't like Correlli anymore than you do. Just promise me this isn't something I'm going to be ashamed of later."

Smoke poured from under the flight controls, acceleration rising, G-forces unbearable. Energy danced off the deck, St. Elmo's fire rippling across the instrument studded walls. A final groan as the hull peeled away, atmosphere lost. Should have been dead. Should all have been torn to atoms. Instead, a hallway beckoned, crystalline chambers so blue they hurt the eye. Doors opened into doors, a kaleidoscope of possibilities. Everything opened before him, every secret, every subtle shade of what was and is and ever shall be. Behind him someone screamed for him to come back. Couldn't stop. Too much at stake. Heart's desire and mortal fear spun into one endless, twining thread. No stopping now. Find the boy. Save him. Hold him tight and never let go.

Find the boy...

The storms passed, the night so clear the Big Dipper was visible despite the city glare. Jake watched the house and shivered in the cold wind. He was frightened. Frightened of being caught, frightened of not arriving in time. Ty stood in front of the living room window, face pressed against the glass, his breath leaving angel wings on the cold pane. If the blinds hadn't been drawn the family inside would no doubt have seen him by now. Jake dashed toward him.

"What are you doing?" He grabbed Ty by the shoulder, but the big man wrenched free.

"Leave me 'lone."

"No." Jake said it as if he was scolding a puppy. "This isn't your business anymore."

"Let me go." Ty stuttered, his face a mask of despair and self-loathing. "Find the boy."

"I said no." Jake pulled Vernier away from the window. "We have to go back."

Headlights swung toward them, red and blue strobes shredding the darkness. A trooper in a thick green jacket with a fur collar leapt out of the car, revolver in hand. The porch light snapped on and the door burst open. The big man he'd seen before stumbled out.

"What the hell?"

Jake tried again to grab Vernier but he broke loose and slipped through the walls, nothing but his tortured cries echoing on the wind. The cop edged closer, pistol at arms length, ready to shoot. Terrified, Jake's instincts took control and he followed Vernier inside the house. He felt the walls pass over him, insubstantial barriers, form without function. Vernier was crying, sobbing incoherently inside a child's bedroom, backlit by the nightlight along the baseboard. The boy lay asleep, locked in his own private hell. Vernier reached toward him, but Jake grabbed his arm.

"Sir, don't do this!"

The child stirred, opened his eyes and screamed. The door behind them opened and the lights flashed on. The woman from the kitchen stood in the doorway, too shocked to move. Recognition spilled over her face even as Jake tackled Vernier, reality spilling into nothingness as they fell. Crystalline light replaced the boy's bedroom, an endless maze of doors swirling in an electric mist. He struggled against his commander's violent thrashing as he guided them back to the hospital, back to the dull, beige walls that had become their cage.

"Ty! Stop it! Let it go!"

The doorlock clicked. Orderlies burst inside and pinned Vernier to his bed, holding him down as a male nurse rushed in, hypodermic in hand. They stared at Jake, too frightened to wonder how he had managed to get inside another locked room.

The helicopters arrived at dawn, snow swirling around them as they set down. Jake threw on his bathrobe and wished for the thousandth

time that he had real clothes. He tried the door, surprised to find it open, and darted into the hall. Men in camouflage field-jackets milled at the far end of the corridor, while several more escorted a fully-dressed Mihelic toward the exit. Mihelic saw Jake and quickly looked the other way. Two of the soldiers broke away and started toward him. Jake ran.

The door to Leary's office stood open and Jake hurried inside. She sat at her desk. Correlli stood beside her, a video disc in hand. For a sickening moment he thought it was the surveillance video she had shown him earlier, but she shook her head discretely, warning him to silence. Footsteps pounded down the hallway as the soldiers arrived. Jake stared at Leary.

"What's happening?"

"They're taking corporal Mihelic. They came with a court order," she said quietly. "He asked for protective custody. He's afraid of what you might do to him."

Correlli smiled coldly. "Doctor? Could you excuse us?" For a moment, Jake thought she might refuse, but she stood up and followed the soldiers out of her own office. Correlli closed the door. "Sit down, Sergeant. I have a few more questions, and this time I expect some real answers."

He slid the disc into the computer. Mihelic's homely face flashed on-screen. Jake started to say something, but stopped as the video began. "In your own words, Corporal," Correlli's recorded voice asked off-screen, "tell me what happened above Europa six years ago."

"Well," Mihelic fumbled for words, though whether from nerves or guilt, Jake couldn't tell. "We, Patrol Cruiser Two-Oh-Six, came in formation on the left flank. The vortex, it was getting pretty intense, you know. The radiation was off the scale. Ships were breaking up before they could deliver their ordinance. Orders came down just before the commo failed to launch the nukes and pull out."

"But Lieutenant Vernier didn't do that, did he?"

"No, sir. He figured the only chance we had to stop this thing was to take a ship right down the throat. He ordered us to abandon ship and said he'd drive her into the vortex by himself. Me and Sergeant Holland volunteered to go with him."

"Did you realize," Correlli's recorded voice prompted, "it was a suicide attack?"

"Sure, but it didn't matter. We could see ships all around us dying. No one was getting out alive. I was scared, don't get me wrong, but I

figured if I'm going down, I wanted to take this thing with me. Guess Jake and Ty felt the same way."

"So, you dove into the vortex?"

"Yeah." On screen, Mihelic was sweating as he relived the moment. "The ship started breaking up. We were buttoned up in our suits, which was a good thing cause the hull failed. I launched the last warhead just as our fuel tanks burst."

"Then what happened?"

"Then..." Mihelic's voice drifted off. "I seen the nose cone fail. I mean, the whole front of the ship was gone. But nothing happened. It was like everything froze. And outside, Jesus, you should have seen it. You ever been to a Hall of Mirrors? It was like being trapped in blue glass. Even the nuke had stopped moving. Just floated a hundred meters off our nose."

"Did you try to escape?"

"Escape?" Mihelic laughed, a bitter sound. "The ship was dead. We didn't have anything left. We talked it over and decide to detonate the warhead manually. So the Lieutenant started walking. Walking for Christ's sake, down this corridor toward the bomb. Jake and me followed him. No one even tried to stop us."

"You set the timer?"

"Yeah. Set it for ten minutes." Mihelic's voice was nearly inaudible, his face waxen. "We headed back toward what was left of the ship but Ty, the Lieutenant I mean, he stopped and just stood looking down those corridors. Then he started walking down the center."

"Did you try to stop him?"

"We went after him, but..." Mihelic seemed on the verge of tears. "I got lost. It was so confusing. Nothing made sense. I tried to stop him. I really did. But they wouldn't listen. Both of them just kept walking. I went back to the ship to make sure we weren't boarded or something and prepped the last escape pod, just in case." He stared at the table top. "A minute or two later, Ty and Jake came waltzing out of the mist like nothing happened."

"Then what?"

"Then..." Mihelic looked back up. "They stopped at the warhead and shut of the timer. No reason why. Vernier just stood there while Sergeant Holland disarmed it. Then, they joined me inside the escape pod and we launched. Took all of ten minutes, and now you're telling me it was six fucking years?"

Correlli stopped the video. "Is this the truth?"

Jake nodded slowly.

"You disarmed the warhead?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, Sergeant, why the change of heart? What did they offer you not to destroy their portal?"

Jake stared at Correlli. He hadn't realized it until now, but he hated the man. "We couldn't destroy it. No one could. Vernier understood. So did I, after a while. What good are nukes against gods?"

"Is that what you found inside the vortex? God? Odd that Mihelic never mentioned that."

"Mihelic?" Jake felt like spitting. "He froze on the ship. The minute we turned our backs he ran. He would have left us if we hadn't came back."

"Came back from where, Sergeant?"

Outside, beyond the cinder block walls, a helicopter lifted off, the rotor's beat fading on the wind. Jake watched Correlli. A single bead of sweat rolled down his forehead and suddenly, Jake knew. Despite his bravado, the man was terrified. Jake leaned closer.

"You ever think about infinity, Mr. Correlli? That's what we found inside the vortex. No enemy ships. No secret bases. Only possibilities. Realities that hadn't been born yet. It's a doorway. Step through it and anything is possible. Ty understood. I think he knew from the moment we went in."

"You sold us out, didn't you?" Correlli's face paled. "You and Vernier are traitors."

Jake laughed. "You still don't get it, do you? We're ants to them. The only thing that stands between them and our annihilation is that man you have tranquilized out of his mind upstairs. You think you have him under your thumb, don't you? Guess again. Tyson Vernier is still out there, still inside the vortex, fighting to keep them away from Earth." Jake was shaking, his rage and guilt so tangled he didn't know where one began and the other ended. He snapped his fingers and a fat blue spark popped in front of his face. A whiff of ozone drifted out. "I don't care what you say about me, but don't you dare call Lieutenant Vernier a traitor."

He pushed his chair back so hard it tipped over backwards as he rose to his feet.

"I'm not done with you," Correlli sputtered.

"Yes you are." Jake said, and walked away.

An alarm went off. Jake ignored the frightened orderlies and guards as he skipped from room to room, in and out of existence, searching for Leary. He found her down the hall from Vernier's room, staring out the picture window at the frozen world outside.

"I knew you would come." She took the video disc from her pocket and held it toward him. "You better destroy this while you can."

"It doesn't matter anymore. We need to talk." Jake took her by the hand. She gasped but didn't pull away as the sunlit nook vanished, replaced instantly by the stark beige walls of Vernier's locked room. He nodded at the man strapped to the high, metal bed. "Is there an antidote for the shit he's on? Something that can bring him around in a hurry?"

"I..." Leary glanced from Jake to Vernier and pulled her coat tighter. "Why should I trust you?"

"Listen to me." Jake put his hands on her shoulders. "If I had wanted to hurt you, I would have done it by now. Please, I need to get him away from here. He needs to go back."

"Back where? To the vortex?"

"Yes." Jake's voice faltered. The guilt he had carried so long bore down on him. "Last night you asked me not to do anything that you would be ashamed of later. Now it's my turn. I did something terrible. It's time I set it to rights." He stepped toward Vernier. The man on the bed moaned while his fingers twitched in some drug-induced nightmare. "Please. Let me set him free."

"Free from what? From the vortex, or from you?" Scared as she was, she inched closer. "I saw the police report. Vernier's ex-wife said you two were at her house last night, that you were standing in her son's room. Why?"

"I..." Jake felt the pain deep in his chest. "By the time I found Ty in the maze he was already beyond us. He'd gone where we can't follow. You can't imagine how seductive the vortex is. Anything you want, any reality you can imagine can be true. Tyson Vernier created a reality where Earth would be spared. He sacrificed himself to save us. I should have left him there, but I couldn't. I was so scared."

Leary seemed confused. "You lied to bring him back to our reality?"

"Lied? What I did was a thousand times worse." Jake ran a hand through his hair. "Do you know why Vernier volunteered for the armada? He hated space. Hated everything about it. But he went anyhow because of what he left behind."

"His son?"

Jake nodded. "He was six months old when we left Earth. He would have done anything to protect him."

"And now," Leary said softly. "he's being raised by a child molester." She paused. "Yes, I've read the sealed records on the boy's step-father, too. Are you telling me you're the reason Vernier's wife married the man?"

"I learned a few things about manipulating reality while I was inside the vortex, too."

She stared at him, unbelieving. He began to cry as the emotion he had held so long burst free. After what seemed an eternity she fished inside the pocket of her coat and came back with a vial and a syringe. She filled the plastic barrel then stepped toward the bed. "God help me if I'm wrong about this." Lips set tight, she slid the needle under Vernier's skin.

"Thank you." Jake quickly unfastened the straps. He struggled with the buckles while outside the room someone fumbled with the doorknob. Leary put herself in front of it, as if her small form might block the soldiers. Jake helped Vernier off the bed and steadied him on his feet. "You're doing the right thing."

"I hope so," she said.

Jake smiled at her a moment, then took Vernier home.

Time swept back and forth, endless currents running through his fingers, shifting and dancing while he watched, learning, crafting reality as a child might build a sand castle. The man who had been Tyson Vernier smiled, free at last. The others in the vortex were patient. They would leave him alone for the time being. It was all he asked.

He turned his mind back to the blue speck that had been his home, back to all that he had once considered precious, and to his relief, found it precious still. Billions of sparks coursed over the planet's surface, each life a shimmering, undulating thread. He brought his focus down to a single pair of the glowing strands. They were safe for now, their fates bound together. Jake Holland, the man who had nearly destroyed him, and beside him, under his guard, the child he had scarcely known.

"Watch over him," Vernier whispered.

"I will," his friend replied. "I promise."

A promise. A bond. A pledge between them. His son would live and grow, free from the monster in his life. Jake would see to that. He had promised. And that, Vernier knew as he drifted deeper into the vortex's sweet embrace, was enough. •

They entered an ugly, concrete-slab building, and Boris pulled her through the walls of a sarcophagus—meters of reinforced concrete—into a high, dim chamber.



Cerenkov Blue

Ernie Reimer

"Welcome to La Perla." Nicole Weston pressed a palmphone into the hand of the first guest off the ancient diesel shuttle bus, a tall woman on thin, unsteady legs. "This phone will direct you to your room. If there's anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant ..."

The woman stared at the phone with panic in her eyes.

Nicole signaled to an attendant and turned to greet the next arrival. The guest stepping down from the bus was shielding his eyes from the evening sun. Wrestler's proportions masked his height; he towered over Nicole.

She thought, *This must be Boris Kozlov*. She had memorized the roster.

When he reached for the palmphone, he misjudged the distance, and his fingers enveloped her hand in a gentle grip. He looked down, frowning, then raised his eyes to Nicole's face and flashed an ingenuous smile. "Pardon me, Miss. Let me try that again."

This time he reached slowly, but deliberately brushed Nicole's fingers as he took the phone. The touch lingered on her skin as she turned to greet her next arrival.

La Perla was an exclusive realbody spa on the Black Sea, north of Istanbul. It occupied a low, blocky building, once the summer residence of a forgotten communist-era dictator. The affluent came to undress,

to acquaint themselves with their natural bodies. Realbody was a fad, a return to primitive roots for a generation who had been wired into the plex from birth. "You have to try realbody," they goaded each other from the comfort of their simulated world. "It's unique."

It was unique. Most of them panicked the moment they were disconnected from the plex. Not all of the guests would last a full seven days at La Perla, deprived of enhanced reflexes and proxy bodies. But most of them would last the night.

The morning was already hot. Nicole paused in a shaded cloister, overlooking the beach where naked realbodies scorched their unaccustomed flesh. She leaned back against a cool stone pillar and closed her eyes. She had been at La Perla for two years now, at first as a physiotherapist. But she was cool and deft with people, good at knowing their names from memory, and that spring the manager had asked her to become a hostess. He'd said that the curve of her neck would look elegant against the polished stone façade, and that guests would be charmed by her accent. Nicole struggled to wrap her tongue around the Russian syllables and German consonants. It had been easier just being a physio and helping them to adapt.

A deep voice intruded on her reverie. "You are not out swimming?"

Nicole opened her eyes and turned. "Oh, Mr. Kozlov, good morning." Her eyes adjusted to the deep shadows of the cloister. "I didn't see you there. I'm on duty now but I do swim, early in the morning. You seem to be quite comfortable. You've done this before?"

"No, I have not. But why does everyone rave about realbody? It is so confining. To say the truth, I am bored."

"Give it time. It may grow on you."

"Ah, you are one of these realbody fanatics then?"

"No—but there are things that can't be simulated."

"Like what? People say this, but I do not accept it. People talk nonsense about realbody imperfections. Why would anyone want to be crippled by an impaired sensorium and poor reflexes? And if they really do want this, it can all be simulated right down to a drool. So what is the difference?"

Nicole pushed herself away from the pillar. "Excuse me, Mr. Kozlov, I have to go. But remember, this is the only place you really exist right now."

He called after her, "I could show you other places—where I really exist." She didn't reply.

For Nicole, realbody had been strange at first: the flatness of unenhanced sensations, foods without virtual sauce and wearing old-fashioned goggles and gloves to read the newszines. But later she found herself enjoying sensations that somehow she hadn't felt before: cool air and early morning dew as the sun rose over the Black Sea, ripples licking at her bare skin, grains of sand between her toes, salt tears trickling from wet hair. It all seemed richer. Or maybe that was an illusion too. Perhaps it was just the isolation, the disconnection from the plex that spiced the air.

The following morning, when Nicole waded, naked from the dawn-gray sea, she saw Boris Kozlov perched on the sand above the tide line, his elbows cradled on his knees, his fingers trailing in the sand. He stared while Nicole dried herself. She shook out her hair and walked past him with the towel around her neck, feeling a stir of warmth as her toes sank into the sand. Boris' eyes touched her breasts as she passed.

He said, "Ah yes, perhaps there are some unique realbody pleasures."

He was there again later in the morning with the white-clad tennis players, flailing and stumbling on the packed clay court.

Nicole coached, "Take it slowly. Your coordination will improve. Your unenhanced motor controls aren't delivering the performance that your reflexes expect. Reflexes accommodate. Just keep trying."

Boris walked off the court, perspiring. "I can not take this seriously. Give me my enhancements and I will show you a game, but this is stupid. I might as well be drunk. It would not be any different."

"You could try that." Nicole said. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

"You are not going to tell me that drunk is different in realbody?"

"No—" Nicole moved onto the court to assist a fallen guest.

At noon, she saw Boris in the bar. He was still there at four when she went off duty, hurrying to catch the shuttle bus to Sozopol. The trip to Sozopol took an hour, but as soon as the bus passed out of La Perla's gates, Nicole was re-connected to the plex. She settled into her seat and pinged her sister in Toronto. In the plex, there were no distances, only separations. She could drink tea in her sister's kitchen, and catch up on family news while her realbody stared vacantly through the bus window. The visit ended when the shuttle got to Sozopol. Nicole got off the bus and stretched. She walked along the narrow flagstone streets, and found a terraced, outdoor restaurant by the harbor where she ate and lingered over coffee until twilight fell over the moored yachts and lights came on.

She'd planned to visit an old friend in Boston, after dinner but found herself moping about Robert. Nicole had fled to Europe to escape the wreckage of that relationship, and the one before. It was always the same; men drew her over a cliff with promises. She trusted them; she closed her eyes and let go. It always ended in a rocky betrayal.

La Perla was her nunnery. She caught the last shuttle back and fell into bed, into a dreamless sleep, secure in her disconnected world.

Nicole swam in the predawn gloom, crawling alongshore, watching the street lights wink out and the stars fade. She distanced herself from the spa, stroking and turning, catching the rhythm of the waves, tasting salt. When the eastern sky glowed pink, she rolled over and turned back. It was then that she noticed the white rags—a body—on the sand above the tide line. She turned toward shore, quickening her pace. When her feet touched bottom, she stood to wade.

The fine hairs on her neck prickled in the cool air. An arm moved as she approached, and Nicole's darkest apprehensions faded, but suddenly she felt naked.

The body rolled over. It was Boris Kozlov. His soiled whites were damp and caked with sand. He looked at her with bleary eyes. "Ohhh... god... I am dying."

Nicole smelled bile and alcohol and almost laughed. "You're hung over, Boris."

"No." His voice was a subterranean moan. "Hangover is not like this. I have been poisoned."

"Real hangover is like this, Boris. Come on, get up, we'll get you some coffee." Nicole reached down for his hand.

Boris lurched to his knees but immediately doubled over, retching. He looked up, wiping his mouth with a gritty hand and grinning feebly. "I guess you are right, Ms. Nicole. This is a hangover. I think I will not... move right now." He waved her off. "I will get myself back later."

"You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes." Boris collapsed onto the sand. "I must savor this fine primitive experience—yes?" He rolled onto his back, tensing for the next convulsion. His eyes came to rest on Nicole's pubic tangle, his face illuminated for a moment. "...fine primitive experience," he repeated and shut his eyes. "Go on, finish your swim.... I will be all right."

Nicole returned to the sea, looking back twice to see a boneless arm waving her away.

Boris Kozlov remained at La Perla for the full week and Nicole looked for him each morning as she emerged from the sea. She wasn't disappointed. When he departed, Boris took her hand and said, "Ms. Nicole, let me show you my world some time. I know many interesting places. The next time you are connected, look me up."

Nicole didn't welcome Boris' attention, but it had spoiled her isolation. She woke up at night feeling alone. She wanted to put her arms around a breathing body. She told herself that Boris was different, that she was different, that this time she wouldn't let go so easily.

It was a drifting courtship. Nicole held back, but if Boris was impatient, he didn't show it and his gentle endurance eroded her reserves. They were in Sozopol on the evening when Nicole finally yielded. She was there in realbody, wearing an off-the-shoulder dress and overlaid jewelry, a turquoise-and-silver collarbone inset. Boris was in Kazakhstan and couldn't be there in realbody. He sat at the restaurant table in proxybody, in a baggy linen suit, staring at Nicole's bare shoulders. He reached out to touch her neck. Through the open windows, Nicole could hear the splash of waves.

They drank red wine and nibbled grapes and baklava in the evening light. Boris signaled the waiter and ordered rakia. The sommelier brought a bottle from the freezer and poured a real glass for Nicole, then an illusory glass for Boris.

Nicole said, "You won't have a real hangover, Boris, but I will."

Boris reached across and trapped her hands with his. The illusion was as real as she wanted it to be. His hands were warm and his touch was soft. She trusted him. She said yes to the question he hadn't asked and the urgency that he hadn't expressed. She closed her eyes and let go.

They took a room. Nicole regretted only that they weren't making love in realbody. Afterward, she was contented with his touch, with the slow rise and fall of his chest in the dark, with the rumble of his voice.

After breakfast, when the waiter had taken plates, and the coffee cups were empty, Nicole asked, "What do you do, Boris, when you're not here?" The sun streamed through an eastern window, warm and lazy.

"I design nuclear reactors."

"I know that, but I mean how do you do your work? Do you sit around and talk? Or bash metal? Or what?"

"I work with a team of engineers. We have a special plex—with fat pipes—so that we can use simulations detailed down to atomic levels. We develop new designs, and also we do safety-analysis for existing reactors." Boris was animated. "We are a team, but we do not talk

much. Each engineer knows his job, and we pass the ball, like in soccer."

"And you like this game."

"Yes, I like it. I have been playing with reactors ever since I can remember." Boris drained his coffee cup. "I used to get into trouble. My father would say, children are not supposed to play in places like this, but I would find my way past the lock-outs—"

"—lockouts? You mean you played in a reactor?"

"Yes."

"That's crazy."

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"In proxybody? Not at all."

Nicole stared at Boris.

"You want to see?" Boris reached across the table. "Come, I'll take you to my best childhood place."

Nicole reluctantly shifted herself into proxy, leaving her realbody at the restaurant table, daydreaming. Boris took her to the Kosloduy reactor complex on the Danube. They entered a massive, concrete-slab building, and Boris pulled her through the walls of a sarcophagus, through meters of steel-reinforced concrete, into a dim chamber.

"This is the containment housing," Boris said.

Nicole shivered under a maze of corroding pipes and the stained concrete vault arching overhead. "What are we doing here, Boris?" Her voice echoed.

Boris motioned toward to a towering steel tank. "I used to go in there when I was a boy. Well, not there, but it was the same kind of reactor, near Kiev. Come. The core is special."

Boris pulled Nicole through the thick steel, into darkness, into the superheated water of the reactor's pressure vessel. When her eyes adjusted, she saw racks of tubes and pipes, a steel forest illuminated by an eerie blue glow.

"What's that light?" Nicole asked.

"That is the core. That is why I always came here. It is *bremsthralung*—it comes from the radiation. 'Cerenkov blue' I called it."

Nicole wanted to get out, badly. She said, "Are we inside a real reactor, Boris?"

"Yes and no. This is a simulation, but it is part of the control algorithm for the real reactor."

Nicole thought about Boris playing there as a child. "What would happen, Boris, if your real body was here?"

"Ah, you always want realbody. You prefer the real hangover, Ms. Nicole?" Boris eyes distanced and he spoke slowly as if describing an event that he was watching. "Our real bodies would cook... The meat would peel off our bones... Our bones would then dissolve, but everything would be caught in the filters. No, perhaps not the salts." He stopped abruptly and looked at Nicole, "You want to see?"

"No—"

Before Nicole could protest, Boris had turned gray in front of her eyes. Cooked flesh shrank away from his blind eyeballs and grinning teeth. Nicole fled, returning to her realbody at the restaurant table. The sun was gone, hidden by grey overcast.

Boris joined her a few moments later. "I am sorry, Nicole. It was only a simulation. I did not mean to upset you. We do this kind of thing all the time—to test failure scenarios."

"Leave me out of your stupid games." She couldn't look at Boris without seeing the blind eyes.

Nicole ran from the hotel with Boris tagging after her, along the crooked streets, trying to talk to her. When she got on the shuttle bus, he came inside. He sat beside her. She didn't acknowledge his presence. They rode in silence until the shuttle slowed at La Perla's gate, passing the warning signs. *No plex connection beyond this point. Do not proceed if you rely on life-support prosthetics.* As the shuttle clattered through the gate and his proxy extinguished, Boris voiced a plaintive goodbye.

Nicole didn't answer. She went directly to her room and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, feeling cold and alone. She didn't leave La Perla for weeks after that. When she finally did, the plex Concierge informed her that Boris Kozlov had been trying to reach her.

It said, *There are messages.*

She said, "I don't want to see them. And keep Mr. Kozlov away from me." She thought, Why do I always do this? Fall for such jerks?

The summer passed.

Nicole was in Sozopol, at her favorite café. She was slightly chilled and stiff, having spent an hour with her sister in Toronto. As she reached for her coffee, a large warm hand covered her fingers. She looked up to see Boris' apprehensive face. Nicole's first thought was to reprimand Concierge for letting Boris through, but then she realized that he was there in realbody.

"Nicole, please," said Boris. "If this is the only way I can see you, I will live all my life in realbody."

Nicole put her hand over his and held it there for a long time, in silence.

"How did you get here Boris?"

Boris broke into an unreserved smile and babbled, "I arranged a break from my work and came to find you—in realbody. I came in a car. A real car—with a steering wheel. It was hard to find this item. In our design work, we reached a milepost. It was a good time to take a break. I have been trying to reach you. I know that you are still here. I'm very good in realbody now. I have been practicing."

"Boris, you know that it's not realbody that matters."

"But it does. It is different, like you told me."

Boris wanted to tour the countryside. Nicole arranged a leave of absence. She balked when he picked her up in a vintage, Mercedes convertible. "Boris, this car has manual controls. It's not safe. You need special training."

"It is all taken care of."

She was frightened as they squealed around hairpin turns. "Boris, this is real. We could be killed."

"Yes, but do not worry. I am a good driver."

In a cool stone hotel, high in the Thracian mountains, they made realbody love.

"Do we need precautions, Boris? I'm fertile." It needed to be said; most Europeans were sterile after the gene-plague of the sixties.

"No," Boris said. "No conception control is necessary. My DNA is scrambled. I had the Frankenstein flu when I was very young."

They wound through Muslim and Orthodox villages, past peasant men with leathery hands, sitting in the shade with their canes as they had for a thousand years. Near a monastery, they halted to let a funeral procession pass. The hearse was a high-wheeled carriage pulled by a real, nickering horse. Then came black-robed clerics in square miter, followed by an altar boy swinging the censer, and after that, what must have been the family. Two restless boys tagged behind, and on their heels came endless ranks of shuffling, coarse-robed monks. All of them were proxies with baleful eyes.

Boris and Nicole waited in the idling car, hot in the afternoon sun. She wanted to drive through the procession of proxies, but he said, "No. That would be offensive, and we are not in a hurry. I wonder why so many monks? This must be all monks in the country. I didn't think

there were so many." He addressed Concierge, "What is this procession? Where do all these monk proxies come from?"

Concierge replied, "They're all from this monastery, but they're not proxies. You're watching a procession of ghosts. It's the local funeral custom."

"Ghosts?"

"A proxy without a realbody. People die, but I remember everything. I can synthesize the ghost of a deceased person if I have permission to use the files, and if someone asks me to. The Abbot calls up these ghosts for the occasion."

Boris said, "They do not look happy. They're not conscious, are they?"

Concierge said, "I synthesize them as best I can."

They drove west, through a narrow winding valley on dusty roads, under dry stone bluffs. It was an ancient stronghold, and they seemed to move back in time. They passed mule carts and peasant women cutting grain with sickles. As they climbed the narrowing valley, stone bluffs fell away to one side of the road.

Boris stopped the car at a wayside spring, and after drinking, he crossed the road to look down. Nicole stayed back from the edge, but Boris turned with his heels on the precipice and mimed losing balance, windmilling his arms.

"Don't do that, Boris. It's not funny."

"No. It is not, but it makes me feel alive."

That evening they stayed in a small hotel in a city of three hills. They sat side by side on the terrace, on a polished marble bench, in the blue evening light. Nicole asked Boris about his work. "What was the milestone that you reached?"

Boris told her that his team had developed a new, lightweight reactor for an orbital customer. It was his first major project to manage. The structure was being grown while he was away, and when he returned to Alma Ata, he would oversee its delivery. It would be launched from the Gobi Desert.

"Why there? Isn't that where the Frankenstein flu came from?"

"No, I do not think so. The flu came first from Germany, but other unpleasant viruses came from China—the digital Trojans, I think. Anyway, there are regulatory problems in Kazakhstan; not everybody is willing to lift nuclear material into orbit. China will do it because they need something from our customer. It is a barter arrangement. I

don't care, as long as we deliver the reactor and it works as we have designed it."

Nicole said, "So, are you going to show me this wonderful reactor?" Boris said, "I can't. Well, not officially." His proxybody stood and reached for Nicole's hand saying, "Come see my Feniks." He pulled Nicole into the black of space. The blue jewel of earth was a coin, and the sun burned hard. He pointed toward a small glowing sphere.

It looked like a peeled mandarin orange impaled on a stick, but it grew. Nicole had no sense of scale.

"It's so small?" she said.

It grew until Boris reached out to touch the red hot, glowing surface. It made him look small. He smiled in the ruddy light. "Do not worry, Nicole. No burns, no tricks. This is Feniks. It masses only ten tonnes, and it produces one megawatt of electrical power by thermionic generation. It is revolutionary. What you see is the radiator surface."

Nicole didn't know what he was talking about but she smiled.

Boris returned to Kazakhstan to finalize negotiations with the customer and to seal the lift contract.

Nicole resumed her duties at La Perla. The tennis players tried her patience, and the end of shift crept up too slowly. Every afternoon she took the shuttle out and pinged Boris as soon as she passed through the gates. On the tenth day, he didn't respond.

Nicole addressed Concierge, "Why can't I reach Boris?"

"Boris is dead."

Nicole didn't understand.

"He was infected by a virus. It happened this afternoon during the contract handshaking protocol."

"Dead?"

"It was a new strain of an old digital Trojan."

Nicole understood only that she'd been deserted. You bastard. Why didn't you leave me alone?

Boris' remains were cremated in a biohazard facility. Nicole begged Concierge, "Let me hold him. Please?"

Concierge was silent.

"You synthesize every fucking other thing. Why can't you do this for me?"

"Well, I suppose I can. This may be a little rough."

Nicole wrapped her arms around Boris' body as it burned. He

shrank and crumbled, and slipped away, and when she opened her eyes, she was holding an urn, standing on a marble floor, alone.

Concierge said, "Nicole, there is a small administrative matter. Boris has left the disposal of his personal file to your discretion. What would you like to do?"

Nicole said, "I don't want to think about that now." She knew it was a mistake.

At La Perla, Nicole carried on mechanically. She resumed her morning swim in the cooling autumn sea, but coming out of the water, she couldn't help it; she looked each time for Boris perched on the sand. After a numb week, she took the shuttle out, telling herself that she was going to visit her sister, but she didn't and in Sozopol, she found a bar and drank rakia until the sun set, until the bartender hesitated, until the bar closed. She stumbled out into the night streets and onto the deserted cold sand beach.

She blurted it out then, "Concierge? Can I see Boris? Can you synthesize him? Just this once?"

Boris waded out of the sea, naked, with water streaming from his hair and glistening on his chest. He stopped, knee deep and looked down at himself, confused. Nicole ran into the water and wrapped her arms around his body.

She fell asleep holding Boris and woke on the beach in the pale dawn, shivering and groggy. She rose stiffly, brushing damp sand from her clothing and asked for a cab to carry her back to La Perla. When the car reached the warning signs at the gate it stopped and Concierge said, "You'll have to walk from here. The car can't navigate outside the plex." She was grateful for the walk.

Nicole forgot names and ignored guests until the manager took her aside and suggested that she take sick leave. She returned to Sozopol then, to a room in the same hotel where they had first made love. Each night she summoned Boris' ghost and fell into rakia-sleep holding his body, telling herself that it was the last time and that it would go no further, and if Boris' ghost was restive, she didn't see it. She didn't acknowledge the trapped-animal dismay growing in its eyes, but his presence eroded her loose grip on reality. Nicole floundered and finally let go; she gave Boris' ghost its will, but when his warm lips brushed against her throat, she panicked, tried to turn away. He pulled her back and kissed her breasts. She elbowed him off then and

fled, throwing on a coat and running from the hotel, down the flagstone streets in bare feet. Dawn found her shivering by a seawall, gripping the hard stone reality. She was numb and cold and sober.

Nicole checked herself into a health center. She sank into the diagnostic chair and said, "What's wrong with me—I mean physically?"

Concierge replied, "You're five weeks pregnant, Nicole."

"I can't be. Boris was sterile—he told me."

"He was wrong."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm your infrastructure, not your keeper."

Nicole returned to La Perla, and slept alone that night, in her own bed, for the first time in three weeks. She curled under the duvet as rain pelted the windows and a chill northeast wind whipped the Black Sea. The crash of waves soothed her to sleep. She dreamt about the drive with Boris, ascending the stronghold valley on hairpin roads and Boris standing at the cliff side. As he teetered back, he reached out to touch Nicole's hand. Then he fell. Nicole watched Boris drop until he was tiny speck, vanishing into the cloud below.

She woke up nauseated and staggered to the toilet, gagging over the bowl, shivering in her winter nightgown, hands resting on cold tile. Back under the duvet, she fell into a dreamless sleep, feeling warm, with one hand on her belly, wondering what might be growing there.

In the morning, Nicole took the shuttle out. As she passed through the gate and connected, she said, "Concierge? It's enough now. Delete Boris' file." •

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"In the end, the problem's not about willpower or morality or coming from a broken home. There's no right or wrong in it."



Do No Harm

Brian E. Moore

The sun had finally risen but the day didn't seem to be warming up at all. The cold slipped through his coat and blanket and sprayed little burning needles under his skin when he shifted. Hard to believe it was only November.

He fumbled for his money cup and put it between his feet. He had enough for breakfast and maybe more. He knew a wagon by the museum where they still sold coffee on the sly, even though stimulants had been forbidden by municipal bylaw for months. A drop of java would be good. He could make it last, draw the heat into his bare hands, sip the caffeine into his veins. He needed to treat himself.

"Spare change?"

Shake head. No, they said. Pass you by, rubber-stamped.

He got a real mix of people at this intersection, from students to businessmen to new mothers ferrying babies in strollers. More than just the easy money, they were interesting to watch. All colours and ages and sizes. They came pouring out of the subway in the morning and were sucked back down into it at twilight. They looked important, purposeful, healthy. Real go-getters.

The Portuguese and his wife arrived. He owned a hotdog cart and every day she drove him down from the burbs with the cart hitched to the back of the car. He wheeled it up onto the sidewalk and began setting up. She pulled their sensible Volvo away from the curb and disappeared into traffic.

"What's the word, my friend? Did I miss anything?" The Portuguese loved to talk.

He tucked the blanket under his legs. "No police. No interventions. The stars were shining."

"That's right. You got to keep positive, my friend. What do we pay taxes for? For cops to harass the poor? Let them chase real crooks and leave us alone. I work fourteen hours a day and all they say to me is 'hello, where's your permit, what's your number, why isn't this dated right.' What am I? How the Hell should I know."

"Just doing their job."

He rolled his eyes. "What job do they have? What do they bother us for except they're bored? You know how it is."

"I know."

"So what's new?"

"I got some new socks last night. Some lady bought them and just dropped them in my lap without saying a word."

"No shittin'? You are some lucky bastard. You sit on the cement and the chickies still bring you stuff."

"Yeah. Fortune is smiling."

He perched on a plastic milk carton to protect his raw, pancaked posterior from the salt and frost whorls on the pavement. From his throne he once held court with the best of them—the loonies, the pushers, the bag ladies, the runaways. He'd never been a summer tourist. He'd still be here when the hipsters had hitchhiked off to Vancouver to wait out the snow. He had learned how to survive, how to pare away the extra baggage.

His wardrobe included a T-shirt, a torn, fleece sweater and an army jacket with wide, spacious pockets. He protected his legs with long johns, courtesy of a SallyAnn, underneath some frayed jeans. His runners were high-top Nikes that he had found in a garbage bin at the back of a store. The leather toes were still white, barely scuffed. He had all the necessities, except for an extra pair of thick, warm socks.

He pulled a piece of broken chalk out of his pocket and drew on the sidewalk in front of him. He sketched the outline of a tree with wide, overhanging branches, maybe a maple or an elm. Next to the tree, he coloured in a stream winding down a grassy hill, and across the hill he added flowers with big, finger-shaped petals, the way children crayon them in kindergarten. He didn't care whether they actually looked like flowers. He just wanted the lazy, summer feeling they gave him, open meadows and barefoot kids and all that crap. He etched in

some birds, flat V's - like the shape of an open book—gliding off into the distance and finished with a hollow sun shooting long rays to the edge of the curb. It was always the same picture. He'd been drawing the tree on a hill since he was a kid, doodling it in textbooks during class, scratching it into margins during meetings when he was an adult. He thought of it as a window. Really spiritual.

He stared at the picture for a long time, willing himself through it.

A man's shadow fell across the drawing. He tried ignoring him but the bastard wouldn't go away. Finally, he said, "Spare some change?" He hoped that would drive him off.

The guy had Gucci loafers. The pants were pinstriped, tailored wool, what you get with a two G's suit. A long, manicured hand with a diamond ring stretched forward and dropped a piece of folded paper in his cup.

"Mind if I sit down?"

He shrugged. "Help yourself."

Gucci sat on the edge of the concrete flower planter beside him. The man was wrapped in a black dress coat that clung trimly to him like a priest's soutane.

"It's a cold day to be on the street."

"Better believe it, mister. Once the wind starts swooshing between these buildings..." He stopped and smiled. "I could really use a couple of quarters for something to eat, just a tiny warm me up."

"The forecast calls for a low of minus fifteen by dusk."

"Is that right? Sounds very chilly."

The Portuguese was watching them both suspiciously. A customer rapped on the cart and asked for a dog and the Portuguese turned back to the grill reluctantly.

"Where do you stay after dark?"

"Depends. Sometimes I go to Tim's place for a couple of hours if I've got enough to buy a donut. Mostly I'm here."

"All night?"

"I'm hardcore. Subway grates and sleeping bags."

"You should go to a shelter. That's what they're for. The city spends millions on them."

"I like to choose who I'm with. It's safer."

The stranger was silent. A lot of people ask questions. Occasionally, reporters stopped by to get a quick pic for the six o'clock. He told them the stories he thought would do the most good. But this one was different.

"I suppose you've been on the street a long time. You know where

to sleep, where to find food and clothing, how to keep yourself warm." He gestured at the knapsack and the plastic bags on the pavement. "Is this everything you have?"

"It's my travelling gear, man."

"These are the essentials of your life on the outside?"

"These are the essentials."

Gucci reached into a breast pocket and slid out a sheet of plastic and metal slightly larger than his palm. While holding it with both hands, he read something written on the sheet and then quickly typed across its surface with his thumbs. Satisfied, he returned the pad to his suit jacket.

"My name is Mundy. I work," he turned and pointed to the top of the office building on the opposite corner of the intersection, "up there. My company owns that tower. What's your name?"

"Johnny."

"Your real name?"

"Course it's my real name. Would I make it up?"

"I was hoping you could help me, Johnny."

He looked at Mundy's face for the first time. Mundy had tanned, poreless skin, high cheekbones and a square chin. The throat was too tight, too defined—definitely a cosmetic nip and tuck. The eyes glittered blue under a shock of thick white hair.

"We work with an agency called Habitat Services. Have you heard of Habitat?"

"Yeah, I know them. Everybody knows them."

"Habitat reintegrates the homeless back into the community. They provide treatments, residence, job placements, training and counseling. My company supplies drugs for their pharmacotherapy program."

Mundy gingerly picked up the closest of Johnny's plastic bags and let the top sag open. He peered at the contents carefully, as if it was evidence at a crime scene.

"For the past year, I've looked down every morning from my office and seen you on this sidewalk. I used to wonder what it would be like to have your life. You have no home, no job, no one to fall back on. All you do is beg for money, shit and sleep. Did you know that Habitat has records about you going back almost a decade? You've been intervened by counselors fourteen times just since spring. But, still, here you are. You keep refusing to be helped."

He put the bag down.

"Why is that?"

"This is the life I want."

"No. Nobody wants this."

"Well, I don't want it. I've had some troubles lately. I just need time to get back on my feet."

"You've had plenty of time."

It was like listening to a coroner talk into the mike at an autopsy. Johnny wished he had kept his mouth shut. He wanted to be friendly, dumb as sticks, a big dog licking your fingers. He just couldn't stop trying to be smart.

At the edge of his vision he saw the Portuguese but he also saw two uniforms outside the lobby of the department store thirty feet away. Where had they come from? They were waiting, beating their gloved fists together against the cold, as though they were just there now by accident. He thought about abandoning everything—his books, his papers, the spare clothes in the knapsack—and making a sprint for the subway. Of course, he'd never make it. They would tackle him before he reached the stairs. Maybe he could bluff his way out, not say too much. Nothing would happen in daylight.

"I know you're a junkie."

"That's a nasty thing to say."

"Isn't it true?"

"I used to be."

"And you think you've reformed. Where is your Pack?"

Johnny made a show of unzipping his coat and digging through the inside pockets. "I always forget where I've put it. It's been a while since I had it charged." After rummaging for a few seconds he looked up. "I think I've lost it."

"People don't lose Packs. Habitat said they gave you one last night."

A giggle burst from him like an air bubble hitting the surface and he shuddered. Oh Bliss.

"What do you want?"

Mundy rested his diamond hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"The same as you. I want you to have your life back, to be whole, to be comfortable. You have the right to be happy."

"Happiness isn't the same for everyone."

"Of course not. That's the whole point."

Mundy unbuttoned his coat and his jacket. Underneath, he was dressed in an immaculate, snow-white shirt and a striped navy tie. A narrow, plastic box was clipped to his belt. Mundy slid the container

out of its holder and held it in front of Johnny. The box was marbled charcoal and black and ice-smooth except for a series of translucent tubes along the top. Each tube was about an inch long and the thickness of a fibre-optic strand. They were all different colours. Johnny had never seen so many flavours in one Pack. A small circle of pins as fine as hairs protruded just beneath the tubes.

"Did you know the brain has about three hundred chemicals? Normal brains have normal amounts of neurotransmitters and every cell has receptors that adapt to respond to them. When someone gets addicted the chemistry goes all wrong. Their brains make too much stimulation or not enough stimulation. In the end, the problem's not about willpower or morality or coming from a broken home. There's no right or wrong in it."

Johnny nodded slowly.

"Decades ago pharmaceutical companies produced a shopping list: methadone, nicotine patches, naltrexone. They were searching for a replacement for each addiction—drugs that were safe and controllable. Even heroin was once a treatment for morphine abuse. Eventually, they all failed because they removed the symptoms, not the cause."

Mundy tapped on the box.

"This eliminates the cause."

The tubes shone liquid in the sun. Candy. Juice. Good enough to drink. Sweetness.

Mundy turned Johnny's hand and pressed the Pack into his palm. Johnny let it lie there. It was very light.

"This doesn't look like the other ones."

"This Pack is new. We don't treat single addictions anymore. The Pack adjusts to your body and provides only the amount of stimulation that you need—a fine balance of all the chemicals with the dosages regulated through the chip under your scalp, here—" Mundy gently touched his own left temple. "Cravings, mood swings, depression, schizophrenia, aggression—all under lock and key."

Johnny rotated the Pack, pretending to be intrigued, to consider. The chip in his own head was throbbing.

"Why me?"

"You're the oldest. The odds say you should have either quit or died years ago. Out of the one hundred and eighty-nine junkies left in the city, you are the only one without a Pack."

"Maybe I want to be master of my own destruction."

Mundy's expression turned to pious concern. He leaned down

and whispered in Johnny's ear.

"The Packs work with everyone else. Why not give it a chance?"

Johnny hesitated. He couldn't think of anything to say.

Mundy's perfumed breath brushed against his cheek. His grip on Johnny's shoulder was firm and reassuring.

"You can be content. After what you have suffered how can you ask for more?"

Johnny caressed the frictionless plane of the Pack. When he tilted the box, the tubes glinted and knifed into his eyes with distilled purity. The engineering was marvelous, intricate, pristine. He pulled up his coat and shirt over the naked white paunch of his belly and gently plugged the pins into the receptacle beside his navel. He exhaled anticipated relief.

"A counselor will come by tomorrow to check on you. This is your last chance. No more reprieves."

"I'll be good. I'm sure this will work out just fine."

Mundy stared at him hard for a few seconds, then smiled, patted him on the arm and abruptly turned away. He walked back to the corner. Johnny watched him cross on the green light and disappear into the office tower. The uniforms had already left.

After five minutes, he loosened the Pack and turned the pins away from his stomach so that the bulge still showed in his clothing but the pad was free. He sucked in the cold air to clear his head. Almost lunchtime. He rose, old bones creaking with rust, and shuffled across to the hot dog cart.

"Don't talk to me, my friend."

Johnny waited like a child behind the Portuguese, shifting his weight side to side on the balls of his feet.

"What was it this time?"

"A new Pack. The magic bullet."

"If only that were true. I've worn mine for three years. You can't go back from it. Once they have you, no other drug will do."

Johnny was thirsty and hungry and he was beginning to sweat.

"You're marked. They will never let you go," declared the Portuguese. "He's not Habitat, he doesn't have the same rules. Some night, maybe tonight, the wind will blow down the street and it will be like all the trash was never there. You've got to move on."

"I've survived a long time. But I can't survive without friends."

The Portuguese sighed and his narrow shoulders dropped. He gazed up at the buildings of tinted windows and shimmering pixel-

boards, past the steam puffing from rooftops and the aerials and satellite dishes propping up the sky. He clicked his tongs against the grill.

"Under the cabinet. Left side. Be quick."

Johnny fumbled past the propane tank and pulled out a baggie of whites. It was so small.

"I don't have any money."

"This is the last time I will ever see you. Enjoy, my friend."

He snuck the goodie inside his cuff. The Portuguese gave him a hotdog. He spread a long dollop of mustard across the meat and chewed it slowly and carefully. The hotdog had cooked too much and the skin had cracked and hardened. He sat down and his stomach filled and he was shivery and excited.

They might have cameras all around him: in doorways, windows, light standards, or billboards. He lived in a secure world, with the film always rolling. He eased back down on to the carton and swallowed the pills in full view. No breakfast, dammit. No coffee. The suit was at fault for disrupting his routine and he deserved compensation from the system, from the company, from anywhere. A treat. The old sadness of not being able to stop himself barely put in an appearance.

He slid Mundy's paper donation out of his cup.

He unfolded the page and spread it flat. The photocopy of the single newspaper column was blurred and the print was very small. College of Physicians Disciplines Doctor For Abuse, Theft. The date was nine years past. The face in the photo belonged to someone else, polished, confident and serene.

He lay his hand down on his drawing. The cold from the cement only lasted a minute and then the colours stirred, wavered and smeared into velvet. The frost melted in a widening circle. The grass curved sharp and fresh as spring to the touch, very green, deeper and deeper into lush growth. The tree rose suddenly, tyrannically above him to a height that made him dizzy and nauseous. The sun bubbled and struggled out between the clouds, like the head of a newborn. He couldn't keep the trip from dribbling over the edge of nightmare so he stopped trying. The scene was a little tired and frayed, but sufficient. Exist, listen, rest. Surrender was very liberating. There was no cure for the satisfaction of impotence.

Above him, the birds that were books wheeled patiently in hunting gyres. He took a deep breath, stepped off the sidewalk and into the grassland. Time to go exploring. The wind gusted down the street, picked up the paper and carried it away. •

Identity is not logical.
How many fingers make
a person? How can you
still be the same when
part of you is missing?

Yuhana Am

David Redd

On Yuhana's fifth birthday her father lets her accompany him to the Turbine Hall. Amid concrete shafts and metal catwalks she watches him tending the noisy, fascinating machines. Sometimes they pound erratically, frightening her. She wets herself and hopes he will not notice. On impulse Yuhana stretches a hand through railings towards the spinning roaring steel. Her father shouts angrily. Before he can pull her back she sees most of her first finger disappear into the turbine. "It doesn't hurt a bit," she announces, as a frowning Medic seals the stump. Her father is told to take her home and Report Back.

Later, Yuhana examines her absence of finger, and she deduces that Amness does not depend on Totality.

Yuhana moves up to middle school, where the corridors have Vegetation being Propagated in transparent incubators. She is taught not to think in capital letters, and not to use words she does not understand. She learns silence. Each day she passes green leaves pressed tightly against enclosing glass. She never sees turbines again.

Her father becomes remote and moody, so she does not care when he dies in some accident at work. Her mother receives enough compensation to start injecting cocaine daily, and buys herself a household robot to steer her through the day. Yuhana likes the robot. He is an outdated ex-military unit reconditioned to perform household

duties —and to be a last line of defence should the Enemy ever break thought. Yuhana reads the words TOTAL SERVANT on his silvery chest; she christens him Toto. At last the house has someone she can speak to.

One day she asks Toto, "Are you real? Are you a person anywhere inside that metal and plastic?"

"Cogito, ergo sum," says the robot.

"Crap!" says Yuhana.

Years later in upper school she remembers this exchange, and she reconsiders. What goes on inside anyone? Can thoughts exist until someone has thought them? How do thought and logic actually work? School is unhelpful, its modules showing her only the logic of language. Admittedly this is the same language that Toto and turbines and people use, but Yuhana is not satisfied. Identity is not logical. How many fingers make a person? How can you still be the same when part of you is missing? Neither logic nor biology modules can tell her. Too much school time is spent on personal hygiene, group bonding and social skills. Yuhana needs more.

She notices hints of deeper knowledge, of things called philosophy and politics and quantum mechanics, but these things are not available for ordinary students. Fortunately her mother now drugs herself unconscious throughout the day. Yuhana has time to explore sex with classmates, and to acquire less conventional skills: she brings a heat needle and motherboard kit to Toto. Soon he can reach extra learning channels for her, at first through military routes, then direct-tapping Information Services while her mother groans and snores. Sometimes Yuhana notices Toto having long conversations with part of the knowledge AI, and she suspects both Toto and the AI of possessing amnesia. She is less sure about her mother. Some part of her mother is missing. Does a person still inhabit that body? To Yuhana's curious mind, personality is as indeterminate as the rest of the quantum universe.

Yuhana is intrigued by the problem of Schrödinger's cat—a theoretical puzzle, in which a cat and a lethal device are hidden away in a box, and from then on the cat cannot be known to be alive or dead. The continued life of the cat is a matter of probability, not fact, as long as the box remains sealed. The truth about it can only be known by opening the box and observing, so that the cat passes from probability into fact. Some thinkers apply the so-called Copenhagen Interpretation to this, saying that the unseen cat must be lying in some fluid part-living part-dead state, until some observer looks inside the

box and crystallises the cat into a definite reality. How interesting, thinks Yuhana. Is everything unseen as indeterminate as the hidden cat? Can someone's finger be both part of her hand and within a turbine, until the loss is observed? Is her whole life only a portfolio of probabilities, waiting to be seen?

She has reached a level of knowledge where quantum personality is made hazy by semantics, and cannot define her amness in the clear vision she needs. Yuhana knows better than to share these thoughts with other students. She is due to leave school at last. Perhaps now she will have more time for study.

Her first duties are disappointing. She works as a replication monitor in a Sector 21 manufactory. Synthetic products bubble and plop from recyclers onto humming conveyor belts. Endless rows of pink and purple shapes recede from her. The specifications only need altering occasionally, and between times Yuhana's mind is impatient at the waiting.

She gets Toto to implant a spare playback bead in her ear. Thereafter she listens surreptitiously while domestic items such as beakers and bayonets slide past her unnoticed. In their living quarters, Toto downloads information for Yuhana while mixing new chemicals for her mother.

Even the administration-level training modules do not discuss a personal sense of being, Yuhana finds. So Toto goes searching for amness among hidden literatures, looping into archived records of Enemy concepts—the mysticism in eastern religions—the politics of Nicolo Machiavelli—the erotic sadism of Nazi supermen. Only his special relationship with the knowledge AI permits his search. Meanwhile Yuhana's work in the manufactory goes poorly.

"Your response time is too slow."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you? We'd better try you somewhere else."

She is transferred to Distribution. All shift long her screen shows coloured skeins of light. The software always corrects the colours before Yuhana can, but she does not care. She is listening to tales from Hesse and Dostoyevsky, from the Bush of Ghosts and the Empire of the Sun, tales of yearning and suffering and metaphysics all recounted in Toto's gentle, addictive voice inside her ear. Sometimes he pauses where a place-name has been wiped for Security. This brief gap always disturbs her, like the gap that was once a finger, and so she makes him invent names to fill the pauses. "Vastness." "Dust." "Outside." The

names seem to suggest feelings where there was only emptiness. She has made the words do something which she does not understand.

But Yuhana's listening time now diminishes. Her mother has damaged herself into permanent withdrawal, so Yuhana must take charge. She arranges to give her mother Minimum Care. (It is odd how organisations still use capital letters, as if they have not yet learned better.) The care routine on the limp body in the cabinet takes up hours each day. Her supervisor wastes further time on aptitude tests, trying to reconcile Yuhana's performance with her potential.

And of course she is in the Defence Corps.

Each night Yuhana strips to her grey singlet and she practises with bayonet and rifle along the corridors: an hour of drill, marching or running, unarmed combat, being a sentry awaiting attack, or (most hated) being dressed in yellow overalls as an Enemy to be pursued and hunted down. Worst of all she cannot listen to Toto during this, for the faint energy of her audio bead might be detected.

After exercises a corporal called Aa keeps her back for sex. She submits to him regularly because it makes her seem normal.

The corporal becomes a friend, or thinks he does. He is ambitious. He hopes to be seen by the Leaders one day. He tells Yuhana how he has used live bullets in executions. Yuhana tells him nothing. In workshift times while Yuhana is watching a screen the corporal Aa is practising hate and bloodlust, training with regular troops, or servicing the robots which guard the perimeter. She has to listen to his tales of military action as he stiffens and reaches orgasm inside her. The probabilities say that her whole life will be like this.

When Yuhana can be alone she undoes Toto's chest plate and helps him expand his circuits again. Surely she will find more time from somewhere—and unexpectedly it comes.

The circuits signal the brain death of her mother. Yuhana keeps the body alive for longer than necessary, spending her few free moments beside the cabinet staring at monitor lights, while the accumulated thoughts of millennia gather potential inside her head. Sometimes she opens the lid and looks inside. A human form is still present, but the essential soul has departed—if it ever existed, if Yuhana has understood the term "soul" correctly. Or rather, it is probable that the soul has departed, for in the Schrödinger's box that is the cabinet there has been no actual end, no definite fact observed. Brain death only means that a few basic signs of life are so infrequent as to fall below some arbitrary legal limit. It is for Yuhana, the observer,

to settle the matter.

She sends for the medics, and they empty the cabinet. The men do not look at her. They do not want to know whether there is pain inside her.

Time once spent in caring is now spent in exploring ideas again. It is still not enough. Her researches are still limited by her daily routine, like those growing leaves held down by glass, like Lemuel Gulliver tied down by little people on the island made nameless for Security. Her expanding amnesia is confined to the shape in which society sees her. Why? She fits that shape so poorly that when her distribution quality falls she is suspended from all duties, reporting only occasionally for tests. She is questioned again and again on her feelings for her mother and father, but she can never remember what she ought to say. If the tests prove her incurable she will be destroyed. Perhaps it will be Aa who executes her.

With increasing urgency she explores Information Services with Toto, rediscovering the ancient landscapes of Vastness and Dust where other people have faced the problem of existence. She pictures faces, cities, incidents, until every detail is clear to her. Imagination—possibilities—can seem as real as facts. Yuhana walks with Montaigne, debates with Socrates, wanders dusty songlines in the Dreamtime. She is an apsara, a courtesan, an oracle, a disciple. She presses her lips to flowers, trickles sand through her fingers, lets travellers possess her body. She drinks wine with Cyrano de Bergerac while he laughs and points to the moon.

And one night, with Aa upon her and talking about the weapons he loves, she realises that both his Leaders and his Enemy are only probabilities, possibly only imagination. She has never met any of them and never met anyone who has. She is the real one, not them. Can those other probabilities be closed away?

Yuhana visits the turbine hall.

Gripping the metal railing where a part of her once disappeared, she draws out an attendant into telling her of a man killed by falling into the spinning flanges years ago. The attendant feels the man fell deliberately. "He'd been punished for some carelessness here—demoted—he couldn't go on." Yuhana knows that the man was her father. What made him fall? The Leaders? The Enemy? Or was his amnesia altered by her missing finger? Yuhana suspects that there is a locus of indeterminacy in the past, a point where the finger could be either lost or intact, and her problems began when the loss became real.

She can place herself in similar indeterminacy now—to stand poised between following her finger into the turbines, or walking safely away. But either death or life will be a fact, unambiguous. Even death will be observed, the machines will need cleaning, the attendant will need to be punished. The Leaders will know, or a part of their collective amnesia will now. She does not like the thought.

There is another possibility.

Yuhana goes back to Toto, and sends him to work. Information is sent. Records are altered. The life-support cabinet is registered as scrapped. A medical robot visits Yuhana, and records giving her a lethal injection.

While the knowledge AI reloops the local monitors, Yuhana walks to the location Toto has selected. A wall panel is open. She goes through.

She enters the hidden life-support cabinet, and lies down. Toto connects tubes and feeds to her body. One tube down her throat, another up into her anus, others elsewhere. The discomfort will pass. Massage pads tighten around her, lock in position and hold her in place. Yuhana does not move. She will never move again. The lid closes.

She will stay here in darkness and secrecy, kept alive by machines which one day will fail her. The end might be anything, as simple as antibiotics not clearing mucus from her nostril tubes, or else power loss during an attack by the Enemy. Anything or something will happen, or not, but whatever her state she will not be observed. Toto and the AI have been programmed to blank their memories after sealing her into her box.

Yuhana feels satisfied. To the outside reality, she is an unknown probability; nobody can know whether her life is maintained or not. But, like the hidden cat in Schrödinger's fable, she is observing herself in the box. To her inside reality, she exists. She whispers to herself, "I... Yuhana... am!"

Yuhana waits, unmoving. She knows that her existence is spread eternally and irrevocably between life and death.

She begins to think, "What have I done?" •

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Threading chips and dangling
with the adults had been
fun when she was ten, but
she was fifteen now.
Couldn't her mom see that?

Quilt Cirq

Susan Urbanek Linville

Bet looked in the mirror one last time and adjusted the fractal choker hugging her throat. Blue eyes to match her fingernails, green lips to match her hair, everything perfect. Thank you, Jesus. She was looking like a ninety rank if ever she saw one. With her new REAL look and the jazzed VERTs she'd created, she'd be the talk of the Cirq, life be blessed.

She checked her VERT-senders' charge. The last thing she needed was a partial projection. She leaned forward, smiling to make sure nothing was stuck between her teeth.

Station in ten, she told Sari over her MP. She'd pestered her mom for months for a MouthPhone, finally insisting it was the only gift she wanted for Christmas. Her mom hadn't been exactly resplendent on the idea of her getting an implant, but Bet loved the privacy. She could say anything over her link by just moving her tongue in her mouth. New technology certainly was biblical.

Make it fifteen, Sari said. *My hair isn't greased.*

Your hair's probably perfect as usual.

I wish.

Bet rolled her eyes and smiled. No one had hair like Sari. It was a good thing they were best friends or Bet would have been jealous. *See you in fifteen.*

Bet descended the apartment's steep steps, the clear crystals that dangled from her blouse making a tinkling sound. The beige stairwell opened onto the dining room—its stark white walls, ceiling, floor, and curtains—relieved only by the two hanging quilts offering contrast: Uncle Pete bloomed burgundy, red and maroon; Grandma glowed pink and violet.

Another quilting-bee night. How historic. If Bet had her way, she would unplug the things and stick them up in the attic. Not all tech was biblical. She scrunched her nose and stepped down the final few stairs. The place smelled like cheap lavender candles and oatmeal cookies.

A third quilt was stretched across a frame attached to the dining room table. This one, a collage of plastiform octagons and triangles, was more complex than the older square-piece quilts. Memory chips attached to the opaque white pieces like spiders dancing on snow.

"Bet?" her mom called from the kitchen beyond the dining room.

"Back by midnight," she said.

"I asked you to stay home tonight, to help us with the quilt."

Dead saints! Sari said. *She's not serious. It's Friday night.*

Bet startled, still unused to the idea that her friends could listen in on her if she didn't explicitly log-off the chat. But that was part of the fun too.

"I'm just going over to the Cirq," she said. "To troll with the chicks. I can work on the quilt when I get home."

Think she's biting? Sari said.

Hope so.

Her mom pushed through the swinging kitchen door, mousy brown hair pulled back from her face, showcasing the deep-crease wrinkles across her forehead. Why don't you tox those? Bet almost said. Ever since Dad left for Mars, her mom had let herself go. She was in dire need of a make-over.

"We need all the hands we can get tonight," her mom said. "Bert Gathiers is close to the end now. If his quilt isn't ready in the next couple days, we'll lose him."

Atheist.

Shut up, Sari.

Sorry.

Bet breathed deep. "I didn't say I wouldn't help. I said I would work on it when I got home." Mom just didn't understand what it was like being a teen today. There were status circles to run, projections to maintain, VERT and REAL personas to keep up, not to mention

school, music and art.

"You know it's easier to thread chips when two people work together."

"I'll manage, Mom."

"It's been so long since you participated, I doubt you remember how."

Anger flared. Threading chips and dangling with adults had been fun when she was ten, but she was fifteen now. Couldn't her mom see that? Old enough to have her own MP, her own pass, vid rights, vote rights. She was even making creds with her VERT art site and could move out if she wanted. It wasn't like she was delinquent. She didn't do meds or goobs. She didn't even do porn anymore.

"Bert needs us, Sweetie. You can go cirqing anoth—"

"Well, I'm sorry I have a life of my own! You think I like dangling with a bunch of oldsters, making soul-trap quilts? Christians don't worry about all this crap. We just die and go to heaven." There, she'd said it. Colors rippled across Grandma's quilt. Bet's face warmed. Had Grandma actually heard her outburst? Was her soul really trapped in that thing?

Her mom's brow wrinkled even more and she got that look, as if the brown of her natural eyes was about to shatter the blue contacts standing in their way.

"You and your chicks," she said slowly, gaining momentum with each word, "have no idea what Christianity is. In my day, religion was patriarchal and morally oppressive, but nothing remotely so awful as the superficial, nonsensical, commercial prayer-fest it's become."

"That's not—"

Chill down, Sari said.

She drives me to crucifixion! Next would be the lecture on how religion was supposed to be a way to create laws and deal with people's fear of death. Then would come the lecture about wasting her time and not making use of the talents she was born with.

"Christianity is not about buying the right makeup, Bet. It's about—"

"I'm going to heaven," Bet said. "I don't have to worry about saving my memories until someone can figure out how to put them back into a body. You know how gross that is?"

Quiet up before she takes your pass card, Sari said.

A vein pulsed on her mom's neck like war drums or pre-porn jitters. Bet stared, certain it would rupture and her mom bleed to death right there in the dining room.

Now, I've done it, she said to Sari.

Instead, her mom stepped back, the wrinkles softened and the

vein vanished. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Go to your Cirq. You're old enough to decide. We'll manage without you."

Is she sick or what?

Divine intervention. Thank you Saint Peter. Better get out while I can. Bet should have felt victorious. Instead, she felt sick in the pit of her stomach, like the day her dad left for Mars. An eight year contract.

Like someone had just died.

Meet you in ten, she said, and terminated her chat.

Bet stepped out of the tram with the crowd. The Cirq was a white-washed warehouse next to the river that hunched below an old railroad trestle, dwarfed by the Cincinnati skytowers on one side and the shipping yards on the other. Yellow crosses and blue clouds spanned the upper part of the building, fire and smoke the bottom. On double steel doors, the words Cin Cirq were printed in bold purple letters vivid enough to exorcise demons. It wasn't in the best part of town—that's what made it affordable—but was close to the station. The co-op that ran the place had enough creds to hire a few arms for weekends to keep goobers and bulls out of the parking area. A seven-point-nine safety rating wasn't bad for a teen dangle.

Sari pulled a mirror from her wrist pocket and checked her face. Perfect as usual, Bet thought. She'd used a burgundy skin tone for the evening that accentuated her naturally black eyes and thick rosy lips.

"You think the Kress will be here?" Sari asked.

"The Kress are always here," Bet said. Sari had been trolling for weeks now for some dude in the Kress named BigHand, though he wouldn't even drop her a sub-text. "Why don't you troll for that musician in the Pharaoh?"

"The drummer?" They skirted a puddle in the parking lot and joined the waiting crowd. The sun had set, but enough heat rose from the gray gravel to melt acryl shoes. Another hot day in Cincinnati.

A girl with flaming red hair and eyes glanced at them. She was obviously from Central City, gaudy high-heeled boots and polyleather pants that showed every bulge. Some dudes liked more curves on their chicks, but this outfit wasn't going to get her any rank. Fit the form, Bet thought. The girl had no artistic sense.

"The drummer?" Sari repeated. "The one with the nose?"

The sax, Bet sub-said. *With the eyes*.

Sari laughed. She had the best smile, straight white teeth so perfect

they could have belonged to a saint. And silky black hair. She had more shine in her hair dry than Bet did with a pound of grease.

"He's wide," Bet said. The line moved forward. She reached into her wrist pocket and pulled out her pass card.

He's also jack.

No! She shouldn't be surprised. Most of the music queue dudes were jack-or bi.

That's what I hear, Sari said. His personas are sax-66 and Mythwolf. If he's not jack, I'll eat my underwear.

They entered the double-doors. Bet slid her pass card through the reader just inside.

"Seventy-five creds," the reader said in a deep female voice. "Select your ID,"

"Illustrator1." Bet only used Illustrator for competitions. That added some mystery to the equation. Dudes liked a mysterious chick, and chicks that didn't know you wouldn't rank you down just for spite.

"Status rating eighty-five point seven."

At least her rank hadn't dropped since last time.

"Select your medium."

Bet looked back at Sari. "Saints or sinners?"

"We'd better do saints. If the Virgin Mary shows up, she'll be coming in from that angle."

Sari was right. Since Flaming Wings had moved to Japan, the Virgin was her main competition. Not that her VERTs were spectacular. She never cast anything original, just a combo of bought forms. It was her presentation. The chick would do just about anything for rank.

"Saints," Bet said.

"Competition or observer."

"Competition."

A simultaneous announcement broadcast over the audio, vids, and interlinks. Illustrator1 was in the ranking. Bet's heart raced. Tonight is the night, she thought. Jesus, the apostles and all the saints, bump me into the nineties. There as no way the Virgin would best her; she couldn't pull enough stunts or porn enough dudes. Bet was going to leave the Cirq in the nineties. Illustrator1 was going to heaven.

The prime VERT was dominated by massive golden pillars that stretched endlessly into a bright blue sky. Saints clad in long flowing robes drifted among them. Most saints had stab wounds, heads cut off, or eyes gouged out, depending upon how they'd died. Bet didn't know

most of them, but recognized Saint Joseph, one of the more trendy saints to pray to. She had his effigy by her bed. Another thing her mom complained about. How can you pray to a saint you know nothing about? How can you be a Christian when you've never read the Bible? Her mom was so old-time.

The dance floor, a paper-thin mirror as slick as ice, floated above the main floor. Hundreds danced to the rumbling beat, forming a gyrating fusion of the more popular pink wings, golden robes, and reflecting diamonds, interspersed by darker forms. Clouds drifted like ghosts, brushing people with fine tendrils that chilled the skin. VERT accessories flickered and flared: stars, tiny angels and golden globes, metamorphosing creatures.

Bet scanned the crowd from the main floor. She saw a few new VERT personas, but no one she couldn't out rank.

The Kress aren't here, Sari complained.

You've got a serious brain fix. Bet IDed a chick with blond hair that cast off a rainbow of colorful sparks. MysticQueen. She should have known. Carol Bertrum was in her art class. She thought she was special because her great grandmother was some famous artist. Everyone knew what ancestor she didn't take after.

Sari sighed. *I got this new VERT just for BigHand.*

Listen to yourself. You sound like a goober. Bet IDed a sharp dude in a black and gold dragon-man VERT. Dragon266. His REAL self wasn't bad either: red, short cut hair, green eyes, a little on the skinny side. *What about Dragon266? Nice form. Not bad looking.*

I'll just wait a while, Sari said.

Your priorities are skewed, chick-sis. You only got one life. Why waste it trolling for some resistant dude?

I know. I know. Thanks, Mother Mary.

Bet checked her VERT controls and batteries. *You're going to have to wait by yourself. I've got an entrance to make.*

Blessings. Sari smiled and touched her hand, sharing a moment that was mostly lost on Bet. She had other edens to quest.

Thanks. Bet moved her VERT onto the dancing platform and cast her persona. Heads turned as the image transformed into a lanky black creature with oversized iridescent eyes, fine legs and arms, a narrow mouth with long, curled tongue. Whispers spread like Sterno-flame. No doubt people were asking where she'd bought the VERT. A few would know it was her creation. Bet smiled to herself. Wait until they see the rest of it, she thought. She uncurled her tongue, letting it

transform from black to shimmering red. That got the attention of several dudes occupying the dance floor's center. Her rating bumped to eighty-nine point nine.

At the platform's opposite end, a forest of pink wings parted before a dude's burning bush VERT that twirled toward her. Fire licked out from his sides to form arms. Flame trailed him, smoking and writhing like an evil beast.

This dude is good, Bet thought. Residual pixel overflow was one thing, but residual output was another. Thank the Saints that she didn't have to compete against him. Dudes against dudes and chicks versus chicks was the house rule.

"Dance?" he asked in a flame-crackled voice that sputtered feed-back through her VERT's remote. Bet IDed him. GodFire. His pixels wouldn't gape to let her get a REAL image. Bet touched slender fingers to flaming hands, hot to the touch. Multisensory output. Who is this dude?

"I haven't seen you here before," she said as they twirled the floor, black and red images reflecting across its surface. The rest of the crowd seemed paralyzed, as if their charges had expired.

"I usually stay with the sinners," he said. "When your rating came up, I had to see for myself."

Bet let a nervous laugh escape. "I barely compete with your casting." She sought his rank, but came up empty. Must be a glitch.

"Don't sell yourself short." His flame intertwined with her darkness, his heat with her chill. The cirq lived with their crackling hiss.

"I don't imagine any dude outranks you," she said. She tried again for his rank.

He chuckled. "Don't compete."

"You don't compete!" He must be crazed.

"My sights are set higher." He let her hand slip from his grasp.

When she stopped turning he was gone. She wanted to find him and ask what he'd meant, but several other dudes waited to take his place. If she wanted her rank to ascend, she'd have to keep dancing. She wrapped her tongue around a muscle-bound VERT and spun into the platform's nearly empty center with him. The spell on the crowd broke and they began dancing again.

Bet danced with twenty or thirty dudes before taking a break. Her ranking had hovered around the ninety mark all night, just above now, but it would dip. Out of the dance, out of our thoughts, was the saying. But she was tired as a beggar and thirsty as Saint Arnold. VERT dancing

was no easier on the bod than the real thing.

She found Sari on casting her new burgundy-woman VERT, something between an oversized housecat and a finely dressed Victorian lady. Bet channeled an ice water from the thin-faced boy behind the snack bar and leaned against the wall near Sari.

You still waiting for BigHand?

He's here, Sari said. I asked if he wanted to dance. Sari's ginger eyes glistened. Her whiskers sagged. He said he might if I porned him, but he doesn't usually dance with Town girls.

I told you he was a sinner. Forget him. There are plenty of other dudes.

I know, but he's Heaven on Earth.

You don't even know him.

I don't think I want to live without him.

Come on Sari. BigHand is just a BigAss. Bet took her hand. Let's dance. It will give everyone something to talk about.

Bet coerced Sari's VERT to the dance platform. It didn't take long for Sari to attract several dudes. She didn't seem too happy, but Bet was sure that by the end of the night, she would forget BigHand.

The Virgin Mary trolled across the dance floor with a dude on each arm, casting a fairy dragon that was part retail, part designer. Her bright green eyes scanned, no doubt seeking Bet.

Rank 88.79. Bet smiled. Almost a whole point below mine. You can only porn so many dudes before it catches up to you. She wished she could see the look on the Virgin's REAL face. She was probably steaming enough to make her VERT smoke.

Tonight is my night. Bet thought. She stepped from a flock of pink wings.

"The illustrious Illustrator," Virgin said. "It's been weeks. I thought you'd moved out of town." Her mouth gaped as she spoke, but the lips didn't sync. Shoddy pixel convergence, Bet thought.

"Been too busy," Bet said.

"Too busy or too defeated?" Virgin's head-crest enlarged, sparking red and orange stars. Her rank jumped to ninety-point-two, but quickly fell below eighty-nine again. "Not much of a VERT tonight. Are you not competing?"

"Oh, I wouldn't pass on a competition," Bet said. She unrolled her tongue and snaked it across her breasts, between her legs, and around her left ankle. Even Virgin's dudes were staring now. Her rating spiked to ninety-point-four.

"I heard your mamma's into the Quilt Cirq." Virgin's reptilian face seemed to smirk. Her back fins raised high, but the pixelation fuzzed and the colors faded. Even so, whispers spread and her ranking edged upward. "So, have you shunned our Lord too?"

Bet's ranking fell below ninety. Her stomach clenched. This is the way the Virgin worked. If she thought she couldn't compete, she would tear a person down with gossip. Bet needed to stand fast, make Virgin's words irrelevant.

"I don't stroll in my mamma's shadow."

Virgin's eyes reddened. "Seems your papa doesn't either."

Bet rewound her tongue and pushed forward until their VERTs nearly overlapped. Anger replaced fear. She opened her hands and golf-ball-sized Mars VERTs drifted upward. She hadn't intended on using them in competition, having created them mainly as a way of dealing with her dad's absence. But the Virgin did strange things to a chick's psyche. Just now, she wished they were real planets, capable of inflicting real pain.

Bet set her jaw. "My papa's in the Mars Program. No VERTs. The REAL thing." She extended her arms. Red wing-buds protruded from her back. "Two years in space just to get there, praying to the saints that the ship makes it in one piece. Risking his life for us." Wings unfolded like fine silk cloth. "So we have a second home, a second Earth someday."

Her wings were not the pink, static angel wings that were so popular, but multicolored, iridescent movement pixels. She'd worked for weeks perfecting the colorshifts. Some changes were random, some hardcode. It gave an ethereal, ever-changing quality but at the same time a REAL presence. She was most proud of the way her wings' movements coordinated with the body. She could dance the night away and not worry about her wings lagging behind. Let the Virgin compete with that.

"Saint Sebastian bless us," someone murmured.

"Jesus has come to the Cirq."

It didn't take long. Ninety-point-four. Ninety-point-six. Bet offered her hand to one of Virgin's dudes, a swarthy, swashbuckled wolf-man VERT. He took it quickly and they danced the floor, parting people like the Red Sea. Ninety-point-nine. Ninety-one! She was in her element. The best. No one at school could tease her about being an art-dube anymore. No one would say her father left for Mars to get away from his atheist wife. The Virgin was defeated at last.

Sari? Bet wasn't sure how long it had been since she'd last seen her friend. The dance platform held no trace of a burgundy-chick. *Sari? Where are you?* Maybe she'd taken Bet's suggestion about the Pharaoh dude and gone into sinner VERT. Even so, she, she should still respond to the MP query. *Sari?*

A dude in an icy green snake VERT with scale stabilization and voice retention problems asked for a dance.

"Sorry," Bet said. "Later. I have to find a friend." She couldn't tell if he was disappointed, but her ranking didn't fall below ninety-one. One disappointed dude wouldn't pull her numbers down this night.

Sari. Are you still here? Bet wandered the main floor. A few dozen people had gathered at the snack bar, but she didn't see Sari. Maybe she'd stepped outside. To enter the sinners VERT, she would have to leave saints first and re-enter, paying extra admission for set-up fees.

No. Sari wouldn't leave without telling her.

She checked the bathrooms. No Sari.

Are you spiked at me? She hadn't spent much time with Sari since the Virgin arrived, but Sari was usually pretty independent. It wasn't like they trolled as a pair or anything. *Did I do something?*

Bet nudged through the snack bar crowd and asked the girl who'd replaced the thin-faced boy if she'd seen a burgundy woman. The girl shook her head and went back to watching a vid on her palm-screen.

Sari, you're scaring me. Just answer if you can hear me.

Bet walked to the exit and slid her pass card through the reader.

"Illustrator1. Entrance paid. Select from menu."

"Attendees."

"Name."

"Sari Allen."

"Not in attendance."

Jesus Christ, Bet prayed. Where is she? She pushed through metal doors into humid air. Night had long ago fallen, but it was still hot outside. An arm dude in a blue uniform with a stunner on his wrist stood just outside. Bet doubted he would remember one chick out of the hundreds he'd seen that day. She watched people approach from the station at the far end of the parking area. No sign of Sari.

Bet wiped sweat from her brow. Near the river, every window in the skytower was lit. Shore lights spread a pinkish cast across the water. Farther down the shore, the trestle formed a black spider web of shadow and rusted metal. It wasn't until she stepped away from the Cirq that Bet saw the flashing red and blue lights near its base. Goobers out

on the bridge again, was her first thought. They lost a couple dudes a year devil-daring on the trestle.

Sari! Oh God! Fear prickled through Bet like a VERT cast for the first time. Sari wouldn't be on the bridge. She was no goober. Her friend's voice echoed deep inside her: *I don't think I want to live without him.*

You weren't serious. Bet took off at a fast walk for the trestle. *Sari?*

"It isn't her," she repeated again and again. "Sari went home."

Two squad cars and an ambulance sat at the base of the bridge. The air was a clammy mix of river muck and thick, sour goob aroma. About a dozen goobers hung in the shadows, nervous and fidgeting. Flashlights reflected across the rippled water and sparked between girders.

Four stories above, human shadows edged along interlaced steel beams.

"What's passing?" Bet asked a tall dude hanging with the goobers. He giggled. "Chick's going to heaven."

"Long black hair?" Bet looked up, but it was too dark to see.

"Greased." The dude smiled. "A REAL angel. Porn her any day."

Saints help me, Bet thought. *If you're on the trestle, I want you talking to me right now. Instant. Do you hear me, Sari! Instant!*

Red and blue lights flashed from parked squad cars.

I'm going to heaven, Sari said. Her voice on the MP sounded strange.

Wait. I'll come to you. Bet ran to the trestle, but a uniform stepped between her and the ladder.

"My friend's up there!"

"Sorry, chickie. We've got pros working on it. We'll get your goober friend down."

"She's not a goober."

"Whatever." The uniform dude smiled unconvincingly. "You just stay back where it's nice and safe."

"I have to talk to her." She tried to push by, but he grabbed her hard by the arm.

"Don't make me put you in the car, chickie."

"Okay." Bet backed off. *Sari. They won't let me up. Speak to me.*

BigHand didn't want me... even... after. A silhouette moved far out along the beams. Long hair, shadow within shadows. *If I can't be with him, I'll go to Jesus and the saints.*

No, Sari. There are hundreds; there are millions of other dudes. You're so greased, so beautiful.

Not beautiful enough, Bet. Never enough. The figure moved even farther along the beam. *Heaven will be so wonderful. It's what all Christians live for, isn't it?*

No, Sari. Jesus doesn't want you to die. Not yet. Not now.

Why not? Not a shred of hope in that tone. Doesn't he want me either?

Bet had no answer. Why wouldn't Jesus want everyone in heaven? The saints and angels were waiting. The dead were waiting. Why not go now?

It will be so beautiful, Sari said.

No. What to say? We're best friends, Sari. I need you.

Sari's sub-voice took on a dreamy tone. *I'll see Saint Christopher.* She wore a Saint Christopher medal to school every day. *I'll see my grandfather again.*

What about your parents? They don't want you to leave.

A pot-bellied dude worked around a post onto the beam Sari occupied. She released her handhold and he stopped.

Dad says heaven is like a giant garden, Sari said.

You can't die. Dread surrounded Bet like fog. She breathed it until her bones ached and her skin crawled. Sari, her best friend, stood on that narrow beam, delicately balanced between life and death. A breeze could blow her down. At any moment, the pot-belly dude would lose patience and lunge. She felt it.

It's a beautiful, Sari said. A Christian place. Everyone lives in peace.

Tears emerged from Bet's eyes. *You don't even understand what Christianity is,* her mom's voice echoed.

"Maybe there is no heaven!" she shouted as loud as her lungs would go.

Heads turned. Her face smoldered. Sari went silent.

"Got her," a dude-voice said from the blackness.

It was almost eleven when Bet arrived at the Eastside Depot. The El's electric hum and vibration increased as it slowed into the well-lit station. Faceless people crowded the platform, not a VERT in sight. Bet checked her reflection in the window. Tears had left black streaks on her green tint make-up. Her eye-whites were pinkish-red around blue lenses. She wiped away the streaks and stood, holding on to the bar overhead.

It had been an hour since the uniforms pulled Sari from the trestle. They'd quickly loaded her into a squad car, not even letting Bet talk with her. Bet didn't know if they had taken her to a hospital, home or

someplace else. Having heard the stories about treatment centers and convents, she'd tried to call Sari over the MP to tell her to lie about her reason for wanting to jump. She hadn't been able to get a connection once Sari was in the car.

It's my fault, Bet thought. If I hadn't been so cranked on rank, I would have spent more time with Sari. Sari wouldn't have been alone when BigHand threw her off.

The tram came to a stop. The doors whooshed open. Bet pushed through the crowd up the station entrance ramp. Home was two blocks away. Six minutes at a fast walk. She buzzed her mom to let her know she was on her way.

She passed the Bartlets, an old couple in their sixties, walking four dogs like they did every night. A group of young dudes skimmed velboards amid pools of streetlight, hopping curbs between the sidewalk and street. Bet didn't see anyone her own age. They were probably all down at the Cirq, dancing, competing, and trying to hold rank. It didn't seem so important to her now.

Bet slid her card through the apartment-building reader and pushed the door open. She took the stairs, too anxious to wait for the clanking elevator.

In their apartment, Marg and Joe, two of her mom's friends from the hospital, hunched over the new quilt, hot-guns in hand. Two women sorted chips on the dining room table. Mom sat with an older man on the living room sofa, examining the chip schematic rolled out on the floor before them.

"You're back early," her mom said. "Are you alright?"

Bet touched her hand to her cheek. "I'm smooth."

"You don't look smooth."

"Just dudes at the Cirq." Bet took a deep breath. "You know how stupid boys can be."

Her mom nodded and went back to her schematic. Bet felt relieved.

Bet tried to smile. At least Sari was alive, wherever they'd taken her. "I promised I would be back to help with the quilt."

"We can use extra hands," the man said. "Bert may not make it through the night."

"Are you his brother?" Bet asked. She remembered Bert vaguely, all those splotchy wrinkles and stark brown puddle-eyes, a smell like vinegar gone bad. This dude reminded her of him, sans the smell, thank Jesus.

"Simon Brown," the man said. "We're friends. Known each other sixty-four years." He smiled, diluting his look of wrinkled concern. "Sixty-four wonderful years."

Bet tried to hold her own smile, but it was tough with her throat pinched tight at the thought of her best friend falling from that trestle. Gone forever. Heaven had always been there for Bet, like a VERT waiting to be turned on. Now that image peeled away, leaving only fractal dust. Death had never seemed so final.

Her mom pointed at the schematic. "We've got chips in place for the lower brain functions. Marg and Joe are interlinking sensory cortex and motor cortex chips. You want to set up the chips for the visual cortex?"

"Sure," Bet said, relieved to have another focus. The visual cortex was more complex than some of the other areas, composed of five layers of interlinked chips. The best way to install them was to link them first, then position the mass into the quilt plastiform. It took dexterity, but she could do it.

She imagined an old man waking in a young body and seeing his friend of sixty-four years again for the first time.

Sari, where are you? Bet knelt over the schematic. Five rows, forty chips, one hundred five interlocks, like a massive pixilated VERT. All that was required to hold the visual memory of a lifetime. She remembered GodFire's fiery touch, as existent as any REAL. If we conquer death, do we even need heaven? she wondered. Do I need heaven? *Sari?*

I am so sorry, Bet. I was afraid to call. Sari's voice in her head was like water in a desert, bringing a zillion bright blooms. *I didn't want to die. Not really. Thanks... for being there.*

We're friends, aren't we?

The story poured out of her, porning BigHand, his mean rejection, trolling with the goobers, getting spacey for the first time, climbing the trestle, wanting to jump.

I lied to the uniforms, she said. I lied to my parents. I told them it was a dare and I got scared. They brought me home.

It's smooth, Bet said. Best friends stick. Heaven or no heaven, she thought.

Best friends, Sari said.

Best friends forever. Bet glanced at her grandmother's quilt. Pink faded to lavender, then back to pink. Bet knew it was just a signal that all the chips were functioning properly, but she felt as if her grand-

mother had smiled.

See you tomorrow.

Sure.

Simon stood and came to her, watching over her shoulder as she arranged chips on the schematic pattern. She could tell him how these chips functioned, at least in general terms, how they would contain his friend's visual memory. But she knew he wasn't worried about the details. He was worried about keeping his friend.

"Do you want to help me, Simon? I can show you how. It's not that hard."

He smiled. "That would be wonderful." •

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You've Got What It Takes

Rusti Lehay

you've got what it takes
to map the moons travels

it takes
an avid watcher
an intense gaze
clear vision
sheltered by a wood-framed circle of glass
on december alberta nights

accompanied by
an ardent desire
wakefulness in wee hours
willingness to follow lunar path steps
a desire to learn all its cycles
chart them on a hand-drawn lunar calendar
it takes a serious watcher

i long to be known
i long to be all the things it takes
to compete with your moon

earth's moon swallowed our garbage
pockmarked by craters
tall chalky apennine mountain peaks
form man's nose
twenty-nine days
twelve hours and forty-four minutes
from full moon to full moon

if i dress myself in moonglow
step down your throat of vision
will your telescope swallow me whole

moonlight like rubbed silver clothes me in mystery
akin to a little black dress

like a nautilus adding a new
shell chamber every lunar month
my mystique wardrobe swells

i'll open and close discover me invitations
like oysters in their shells
set to tide's cadence

sea creatures change colours by moon's timetable
you'll never see me the same twice
i'll become more than sixty percent water •

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Leave your home. When
you get to the river, crouch
down on the bank and feel
for the edge of the water.
Get it under your fingers.
It'll be like a blanket.



Spring in the Shadows

Gordon C. McRae

"Hi, Mum. Um, Merry Christmas."

There was an audible quiver to Jane's voice. It had been six years since she'd called her mother up north.

A sniff came from the other end. She could hear her mother wiping her nose with the back of her hand. And then she said it.

"Long time no hear from. Did you just call to torture me some more?"

Jane held the receiver away from her and looked at it. In all the world, of all the 100,000 words in the dictionary, her grade three educated mother had managed to string together the most hurtful ones.

There was nothing left to say.

"No, mother. Merry Christmas anyway."

And she hung up.

For the next ten minutes she wandered around the two rooms of the apartment shaking—and breathing like a rhinoceros—unable to give her mother the satisfaction of bursting into tears.

"Fuck you. Just fuckin... fuck you."

She'd been dry for sixteen days. What did her social worker say? "The worst is yet to come. Every day you'll be shown a fork in the path. One way is always better than the other. All you have to do is choose the right one for that moment. To hell with the rest."

She needed a drink, but only in her head. What she really needed, with every fibre of her body, was a smoke. As part of her treatment, she'd washed the brown tar stains from ceiling to walls to floor of the little apartment and promised herself she'd go outside to smoke.

The winter air cut into the front of her coat like an incision. Four matches and she had it lit. She stood stoic against the wind, shivering like a jackhammer, blowing the steam and smoke from her nostrils to keep them from freezing.

"I don't need her. No fuckin way. I'm doing fine without all that again."

Leave your home. When you get to the river, crouch down on the bank and feel for the edge of the water. Get it under your fingers. It'll be like a blanket. Peel the water back. You won't be able to lift it far, so roll it away from you like a carpet. That much you can handle. Look for the opening. Rough stairs will lead you down.

She awoke drunk between parked cars, the fly and button of her pants open, thumb-sized snowflakes filling the soft-sided hollow of her belly.

Oh, god, what had she done? Not a speck of fucking willpower.

She'd known one good man in her life. And he was old enough to be her father, maybe her grandfather. She'd met him on the street. Slumped down beside her one autumn afternoon not long after she came to the city.

"No trees," he'd said. And he laughed, toothless and shook his head. "No damn trees on this street. But you can still tell its Fall."

He'd turned to her. His breath was earthy with chewing tobacco. "Weird, eh? Everything knows."

Neither of them had any money, but he rolled her a smoke from butts he kept in his pocket and they talked.

His wife was killed walking on the tracks at night. She was pregnant with their second. He'd taken the first one to his sister's and sent him Victory lozenges on his birthday. Could hardly find Victory lozenges anymore, but he knew a place.

"I need someone to sleep with," said after a while. "I won't hurt you. I'll get us some food. I don't even want sex. I just want to sleep together. Quiet like. No talking. Even with our clothes on is ok."

He brought a can of beef stew from the men's shelter. With her

back to him, she'd cried in his arms until she fell asleep from exhaustion.

The walls dripped from the river above. She had to go backwards on her hands and knees so as not to slip on the stone stairs. When she reached bottom the water was up to her ankles.

The passage led under the river. Light flickered through. The path led gently down, down, until she came to a small room lit by lamps. A woman stood there waiting for her.

"Come," she said. "There is much to do."

There was never anything to do on Boxing Day. But at least the bars were open again. Silvia came over around four and hauled her out of bed.

"Come on, keep me company. Your landlady's got my kid. Even if you're not drinkin' you can watch me."

She nursed a can of Coke for half an hour before she gave in. By then Silvia was leaning close and rambling.

"I didn't want him. I swear to god I didn't want him at first, but like, it wasn't my choice. Like somebody sends you a letter and you don't even have to open it to know what it says. You know what I mean?"

"No," she laughed.

"You just fuckin wanna keep the envelope around it cause you don't know your hands. You don't know them at all. It's not just fuckin words in them."

Every sleazeball guy in the place wanted to buy them a drink. By eight she was bombed. Silvia had hauled her over to a table with three guys with more pitchers on the table than glasses. Two were white guys. Silvia kept whispering the third one was a chief from up north. His braids were tied with leather and tucked into the front of his expensive looking parka.

"He's mine. I don't give a shit if he's married. You can take those two, can't you?"

One of them was square-jawed and quiet, the other wanted to tell her his life story. She liked the quiet one, but the chief went to the washroom and never came back. Silvia, disappointed, left with square-jaw, leaving her with Mr. Yackety-yak. He paid for everything from a small roll of bills held by a post office elastic.

When it was just the two of them at the table, he told her about his job, ripping up rail and ties up by Peace River. He put his hand on her

leg and she didn't move it. He was staying at his brother's place. They were in Quebec, with his wife's relatives.

She remembered puking out the car, splattering the back window and tire, and laughing, laughing. When he handed her a cigarette she crumpled it and threw it under the dash.

"Never again, never again," she said. "Till now." And she grabbed another from the pack and lit it with his Zippo, the flame blowing demon's hair with the window open.

The rowhouse was across from a park, two story, wooden screen door and a kicked hole in the storm door patched with drying masking tape. There were wooden kitchen chairs in the livingroom, a playpen full of laundry and a big screen TV.

He helped her up the stairs. She got a sliver from the two-by-four railing. Went all the way up with one snowboot still on. Now that he was here, the man went strangely silent.

They came to a huge cavern. All the machines were made of wood. The people were all working, some in armchairs, some whistling at benches, children helping their parents. A little boy was making spruce needles. His sister was handing boxes of them to their mother, who dipped them in sap and stuck them to little bristly twigs.

Everything smelled like Christmas.

Farther down the bench, a man attached the twigs to branches and the branches to limbs. The finished trees were carted off into a dark tunnel.

They emptied the bottle of Captain Morgan's from the underwear drawer.

"Child you don't. No child you bleed," her auntie had told her once, when she was still too young.

She half remembered him swearing in the bathroom, his crotch covered in her blood. She must have passed out by the time he returned and started beating on her. She awoke, past the point of pain. He was now lying beside her, head half under the pillow, slobbering onto the sheet. God, he was ugly.

Then she caught herself in the mirror, one eye nearly swollen shut, the other blinking, not recognizing, and apologized to him. She took his cigarettes and the roll of bills from his pocket, got down the stairs and out into the cold.

So many streets. So many houses full of people who weren't

bleeding, houses full of children.

They put her to work painting poplar leaves. It was Spring after all. First the color, then the sticky gloss.

"This one's in the shade of a hillside," the woman told her. "You'll have to make them smaller. Spring comes later to the ones in the shadows."

She was shown how to form them into buds. When she'd made a little row of them on the table in front of her, a little boy came by and took them away on a silver tray. He handled them so delicately it made her want to cry.

"Isn't he cute?" said the woman across from her. "I make them for him now. To heck with the trees."

She filled a bread bag with snow and brought it inside for her eye. How she'd ever made it home, she didn't know. All she wanted to do was sleep, roll the covers around and around her till she disappeared into the floor.

When he wasn't drinking, her father pretended to be a hunting guide. He'd bring Americans out into the bush, make them suffer enough to think they were on an adventure and eventually lead them to a bear. One good payday he left fifty dollars on the table and never came back. After eight years of playing mother to her mother, she did the same.

"Where's my fifty dollars, you little bitch?" was her mother's goodbye.

She and Silvia had grown into the city together. "You want to hide, you don't go into the bush. You go where there's lots of people."

Silvia found a man when she got pregnant. He kicked Jane out when she was too sick to work. A half-assed rodeo cowboy took her down to Montana, paid for everything, then left her at a truck stop with a restaurant bill for twenty bucks she didn't have. She hitched back to Edmonton only to end up in the remand center for three months. The girl she bunked with was full of helpful tips.

"You want to slit your wrists, you're wasting your time if you don't hold them underwater. The blood will clot while you're passed out. Do it in the bathtub and lay on your arms."

One night the woman came up and put her hand on her shoulder.

"I've got something to show you."

They passed hundreds of people. Many were peering through large magnifying glasses, working with tweezers on snarls of moss or roots of grass.

The tunnels led everywhere. Cavern after cavern of people at work. They went on and on until the air grew so cold she could hardly bear it.

She had to stop the woman with a shivering hand.

"I don't want to die," she said.

The woman looked at her and pursed her lips. "I understand. You don't have to be afraid."

In the next tunnel, men were putting coal into the stone walls and covering it up.

They stood and watched them for a long while.

"Do they make everything?"

The woman just smiled at her.

"Even snow?"

She woke and smoked a cigarette from inside her cocoon of clothes and blankets, throwing the butt into a hole in the plaster wall. The sun was almost up. There was shouting from the room next door.

"I just want to fuckin sleep," she groaned, and pulled the covers over her head.

Then the knock came at the door. Who ever it was, it was none of her business. Through the covers she could hear a muffled voice. Then a key turned in the lock and she heard the landlady's gravelly voice and then a younger woman's.

"Police. Are you in here?"

Thinking of the roll of bills she jumped out of bed and headed for the window. But she slipped on the meltwater from the breadbag and fell flat.

"Hey there girl," said the woman cop, grabbing her arm. "Hold your horses. This isn't about you."

"What the fuck do you want?" She recognized the cop from her years on the street.

"Do you know Silvia Broadfoot? Your landlady here says you're buddies."

"What about her?"

"Were you with Silvia last night at the Royal? Did you see who she might have left with?"

She was stone cold as the cop told her where they found her. She was even colder when they brought her to the hospital morgue to identify her. It was only when she got out of the car back home that she lost it on the stairs.

"Oh, god... oh, god, oh god, oh god...."

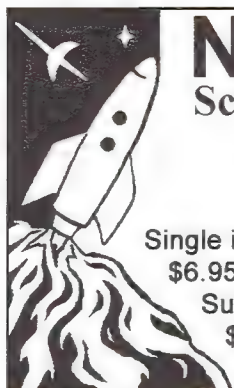
The City paid for everything. Jane would eventually get her ashes and wrap the box tight in a Safeway bag and put it up high on the kitchen cupboard.

But that day, before social services came for Silvia's boy, the landlady had to go out. She came upstairs with him wrapped to the eyes. Left a can opener, formula and diapers. It turned out to be only an hour she lay down with him. But that hour was enough. •

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about our contributors

PAUL BARTEL is a rarity: born, raised, and still living in Calgary, along with his wife Caroline (another native Calgarian). In between looking after the livestock—two dogs, a chameleon, a dozen or so fish, some frogs, and the cat—Paul finds time to peck out stories. He firmly believes that the cat whispers story ideas to him during the night. This is his first published story.

JOHN BOWKER: During the winter months, John is often found sealed in his front porch hammock above the snowdrifts, wrapped in mylar insulation and writing by the glow of a wireless laptop. During all four seasons he may also be found at crossingmidnight.net. A graduate of the Odyssey Writers Workshop, he lives and writes outside of Boston.

KEVIN COCKLE lives in Alberta where he toils for The Man, begs for extra lumps of coal, scrounges for additional bowls of cold porridge, and scratches out tales of the fantastic under flickering candlelight.

FIONA HEATH lives in Waterloo, Ontario with her partner and son. This is her third story for *On Spec* since 1996. She writes slowly and is easily distracted. She hopes to finish a novel sometime this century.

RUSTI LEHAY is an Edmonton freelance writer whose poetry has appeared in *The Prairie Journal of Canadian Literature*, *FreeFall*, *Other Voices*, and on a spoken word collection with *Tupperware Sandpiper*. Her short stories have received awards and Honourable Mentions, and her limited edition chapbook *i'm not sure* (1999) sold out. She is thrilled to have her poetry appear in *On Spec*.

SUSAN URBANEK LINVILLE lives in Bloomington, Indiana, with her husband and has a daughter attending Indiana University. She has published stories in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*, *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies, *On Spec*, *Writer's of the Future Vol. 11*, and the web publications *HMS Beagle* and *Parageography*. She has a PhD in Biology and presently works for the Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behavior at Indiana University.

GORDON McRAE is an award-winning Edmonton writer and one of the founding fathers of the Raving Poets. He has three kids, a heap of pets and spends his non-writing hours recording a kids' CD and studying percussion. He has just completed the first in a series of juvenile science fiction novels, *Kana and the Red Pilot*. His fiction has been published most recently in *Challenging Destiny* and *Storyteller* magazine.

BRIAN MOORE lives in Toronto. *Do No Harm* is his first published story. He bears no relation to the deceased Irish author of the same name but wishes he did.

TONY PI: An itinerant lecturer with a Ph.D. in Linguistics, Tony Pi teaches and collects data on dialects of Canadian English wherever opportunity arises, eh? After years of committing serial fiction on-line, he now writes poetry and short fiction in his spare time, preferring the fantasy and mystery genres. His first fiction publication was a short mystery, *Dynamics of a Hanging*, which appeared in *Shred of Evidence*. This is his first poetry sale.

DAVID REDD lives and works in Wales, and his work has appeared in *Fantasy Annual 5*, *Spectrum* and *Scheherazade*. His first Canadian appearance was in *Starting Points in Reading—Level F*, a collection strangely neglected by genre reviewers. Later, CHRW Ontario broadcast a radio reading of his *On the Deck of the Flying Bomb*. After all that and *On Spec*, surely David is an honorary Canadian by now?

ERNIE REIMER used to be happy playing in the wormholes of hard science and engineering, but there was an accident with time, and he woke up in the twenty-first century. He now lives near Toronto and family, and when he spins-up in the morning, he writes. *Cerenkov Blue* is his second published story.

JUSTIN STANCHFIELD lives with his wife and two children on a Montana cattle ranch, a stone's throw from the Continental Divide. His work has appeared in various publications including *Boys' Life*, *Paradox* and most recently the *Absolutely Brilliant In Chrome* anthology from Phobos Books.

JESS STUART earned a Masters of Pastoral Ministry in 1997 and has been freelancing for religion and spirituality journals ever since. Her articles have appeared in a number of Canadian and American publications, and she was nominated for a Canadian Church Press Award in 2000. Her poetry has appeared in *Room of One's Own* and her fiction in *Liguorian* and *Writer On Line*. This year she completed a novella, and is working on her first full-length novel.

RAY TROLL: From his tree-top studio, high above the Tongass Narrows in rainswept Ketchikan Alaska, Ray Troll draws & paints fishy images that migrate into museums, books and magazines and onto t-shirts sold 'round the globe.

Basing his quirky, aquatic images on the latest scientific discoveries, Ray brings a street-smart sensibility to the worlds of ichthyology & paleontology. See more of Ray's work at www.trollart.com.

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